

THE TOP 100 PC GAMES 2023

PC GAMER[®]



LAUNCH
SPECIAL

FUTURE

ISSUE 387

STARFIELD

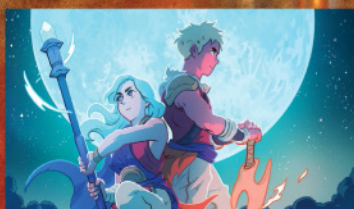
BETHESDA'S COSMIC NEW RPG BLASTS OFF

PLUS



ARMORED CORE 6

HOT NEW GIANT STOMPY
MECHA SIM PLAYED



SEA OF STARS

EXCLUSIVE ACCESS TO
THE STUNNING NEW RPG



JAGGED ALLIANCE 3

TURN-BASED TACTICS
AND BIG EXPLOSIONS



DAVE THE DIVER

THE OUT-OF-LEFT-FIELD
SENSATION REVIEWED

CYBERPOWERPC



Infinity X135 D5

CPU Intel® Core™ i5-13400F

GPU Nvidia® GeForce® RTX 4070

32GB DDR5 Memory

2TB NVMe SSD

Starting from **£1499**



Infinity X137

CPU Intel® Core™ i7-13700KF

GPU Nvidia® GeForce® RTX 4070

32GB DDR5 Memory

2TB NVMe SSD

Starting from **£1899**

 **CYBERPOWER**PC

BACK TO SCHOOL!

PCs & Laptops



 **Microsoft**

Visit our website!



Order today!

✉ sales@cyberpowersystem.co.uk ☎ 03333-237776

Follow Us!

🐦 🎵 📺 🎮 @CyberPowerUK 📷 @cyberpower_uk

AVAILABLE NOW
ON STEAM EARLY ACCESS



SHADOWS — OF DOUBT —



PC GAMER

#387 OCTOBER 2023

Future Publishing Ltd

Quay House, The Ambury, Bath BA1 1UA

Tel 01225 442244 | Email letters@pcgamer.com

www.pcgamer.com

facebook.com
/pcgammagazineyoutube.com
/pcgamertwitter.com
/pcgamertwitch.tv
/pcgamer**PC GAMER**
Forum

forums.pcgamer.com

PC GAMER PRESENTS
PC GAMING
SHOWpcgaming
show.com

All contents © 2023 Future Publishing Limited or published under licence. All rights reserved. No part of this magazine may be used, stored, transmitted or reproduced in any way without the prior written permission of the publisher. Future Publishing Limited (company number 2008885) is registered in England and Wales. Registered office: Quay House, The Ambury, Bath BA1 1UA. All information contained in this publication is for information only and is, as far as we are aware, correct at the time of going to press. Future cannot accept any responsibility for errors or inaccuracies in such information. You are advised to contact manufacturers and retailers directly with regard to the price of products/ services referred to in this publication. Apps and websites mentioned in this publication are not under our control. We are not responsible for their contents or any other changes or updates to them. This magazine is fully independent and not affiliated in any way with the companies mentioned herein.

NEXT ISSUE ON SALE: September 14, 2023

If you submit material to us, you warrant that you own the material and/or have the necessary rights/permissions to supply the material and you automatically grant Future and its licensees a licence to publish your submission in whole or in part in any/all issues and/or editions of publications, in any format published worldwide and on associated websites, social media channels and associated products. Any material you submit is sent at your own risk and, although every care is taken, neither Future nor its employees, agents, subcontractors or licensees shall be liable for loss or damage. We assume all unsolicited material is for publication unless otherwise stated, and reserve the right to edit, amend, adapt all submissions.



We are committed to only using magazine paper which is derived from responsibly managed, certified forestry and chlorine-free manufacture. The paper in this magazine was sourced and produced from sustainable managed forests, conforming to strict environmental and socioeconomic standards.



Member of the
Audit Bureau of
Circulations
12,708
January
December 2018



For press freedom
with responsibility



Future plc is a public company quoted on the London Stock Exchange (symbol: FUTR)

www.futureplc.com

Chief executive **Jon Steinberg**
Non-executive chairman **Richard Huntingford**
Chief financial and strategy officer **Penny Ladkin-Brand**

Tel +44 (0)1225 442 244

"STARFIELD IS BETHESDA'S BIGGEST EVER RPG"



Starfield, regardless of how it eventually scores on review, is the biggest videogame release of 2023. It is the game that PC and console gamers around the world have been talking about for years, literally, and the hype level right now is truly off the chart.

And it's easy to see why. *Starfield* is Bethesda's biggest ever single-player RPG, with

an expansive vision and scope that has simply never been attempted before in the history of gaming. Luckily, we've got everything you need to know about *Starfield* at launch in our special feature, readable starting on page 38.

ROBERT JONES
PRINT EDITOR
robert.jones@futurenet.com



The PC Gamer team



MORGAN PARK
Twitter
@MorganRPark

This month
Took his military FPS skills to a new level by playing *BattleBit* and *Six Days in Fallujah* at the same time.



ROBIN VALENTINE
Twitter
@robinvalentine

This month
Wondered why he was looking at life from a new perspective. Realised he was laying down.



TED LITCHFIELD
Twitter
@DORFpatrol

This month
Dispatched dreams in a delivery warehouse with a bunch of chipper robot colleagues.



CHRIS LIVINGSTON
Twitter
@_clivingston_

This month
Went deep sea diving in order to catch a variety of creatures to turn into delicious sushi.

PC Gamer (ISSN 1351-3540, USPS 24170), September issue 386, is published monthly with an extra issue in April by Future Publishing, Quay House, The Ambury, Bath, BA1 1UA, UK. Airfreight and mailing in the USA by agent named World Container INC 150-15, 183rd St, Jamaica, NY 11413, USA. Periodicals Postage Paid at Brooklyn, NY 11256. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to PC Gamer, Air Business Ltd, c/o World Container INC 150-15, 183rd St, Jamaica, NY 11413, USA.

Contents

#387
OCTOBER 2023

SUBSCRIBE TO
PC GAMER
Check out our
latest offer!
SEE p60



Monitor

08 THE TOP STORY

Preserving old PC games for the future

10 THE SPY

New gaming rumours investigated

12 SPECIAL REPORT

Using a CRT monitor for PC gaming

14 SECRET LEVEL

How to make a videogame solo

16 INCOMING

The hottest games to get excited for

Previews

18 Armored Core 6

22 Enshrouded

24 Six Days in Fallujah

28 Blasphemous 2

30 Sea of Stars

34 BattleBit Remastered

Features

38 Bethesda's cosmic new RPG Starfield

48 The complete un-history of Half-Life 3

24



38



18 ARMORED CORE 6

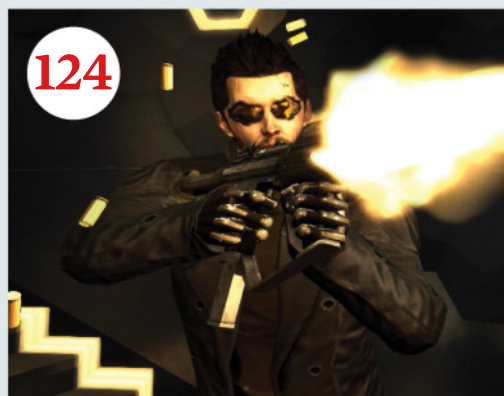
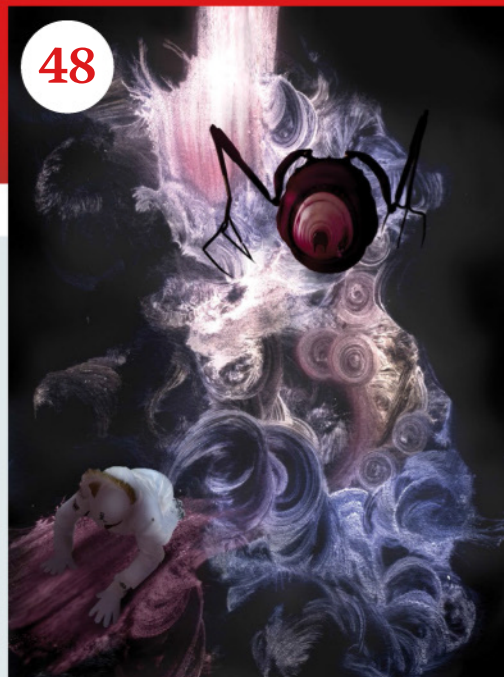
Big stompy mecha-on-mecha combat in a star system that's literally on fire. Oh yeah, FromSoftware's latest game sounds epic. We go hands-on.

38 STARFIELD

Bethesda's cosmic new single-player RPG *Starfield* is finally here, and we celebrate its launch with a cover feature exploring its immense scope and vision.

48 HALF-LIFE 3 UN-HISTORY

Rick delves into the story of how *Half-Life 3* never happened. Can PC Gamer get close to the truth?



72 DAVE THE DIVER

Chris catches fish by scuba diving by day, then transforms said sea creatures into delicious sushi by night, selling them in a restaurant. It's one of the games of the year.

94 NEW GAMING MICE TESTED

The PC Gamer hardware lab tests six of the hottest new gaming mice to hit the market in 2023.

124 DEUS EX: HUMAN REVOLUTION

Ted has fun with robot arms, VTOLs, and gravelly-voiced ex-cops in the sci-fi action RPG.

Reviews

- 64 Jagged Alliance 3
- 68 Aliens: Dark Descent
- 70 Oxenfree 2: Lost Signals
- 72 Dave the Diver
- 74 Lakeburg Legacies
- 76 Exoprimal
- 80 Layers of Fear
- 82 The Last Worker
- 84 Viewfinder
- 86 Ghost Trick

FREE GAMES

- 88 Chainged
- 89 Sandtrix
- 89 The Pulse of Evil

THEY'RE BACK

- 90 Heavy Rain
- 91 Sniper Elite 4
- 91 Rise of the Tomb Raider

Hardware

- 94 GROUP TEST
- 100 TECHREPORT
- 102 TECH TALES
- 104 BUYER'S GUIDE

Extra Life

108 NOW PLAYING

Magic: The Gathering Arena, *Baldur's Gate: Enhanced Edition*, *Street Fighter 6*, *Aliens: Dark Descent*

112 UPDATE

Dredge's new passive mode played

114 MOD SPOTLIGHT

Turning *Half-Life* into a top-down isometric twin-stick shooter

116 HOW TO

Heavenly *Diablo IV* tips and tricks

118 DIARY

Hunting a killer in *Shadows of Doubt*

122 WHY I LOVE

The joy of Star Wars' battle droids

124 REINSTALL

Fun with robot arms, VTOLs and shades in *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*

128 MUST PLAY

DJMax Respect V, *Tekken 7*, *Street Fighter 6*, *Honkai: Star Rail*, *Dredge*, *Guild Wars 2*, *Stranger of Paradise: Final Fantasy Origin*, *Let's Build a Zoo*

MONITOR

NEWS | OPINION | DEBATE



GAMES OVER

Study finds 87% of games unplayable without piracy, scavenger hunts, or archives

The Video Game History Foundation, a “non-profit organisation dedicated to preserving, celebrating, and teaching the history of videogames”, has published a study that it says shows most older games are now beyond the reach of players, unless they’re willing to in most cases pirate them.

“87% of classic videogames released in the United States are critically endangered. Just 13% of videogame history is being represented in the current marketplace. In fact, no

TOP: The industry claims it “already does enough to preserve its own history commercially, and that additional protections would hurt their bottom line”.

period of videogame history defined in this study even cracked 20% representation.”

The methodology used a randomised sample of 1,500 games released before 2010, “Roughly the year when digital game distribution started to take off.” They also collected targeted data on different

**“JUST 13%
OF VIDEOGAME
HISTORY IS BEING
REPRESENTED”**

consoles, so in total over 4,000 games were included in the study.

Whether a re-released game counted as “accessible” was based on how much of the original had been preserved. For example, the foundation considered the remaster of 1987’s *Jinxster* to qualify for still being “available”, while *Yakuza Kiwami*, a remake of Sega’s 2005 action classic *Yakuza*, was considered too different to qualify the original as being “in print”.

ON YOUR BIKE

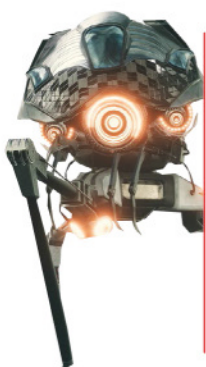
This comes in the environment of increasingly complex arguments over copyright laws and game

WORLD WAR 1.1

RECTIFY MISTAKES



Spare a thought for Nathan Seedhouse, lead dev on *Grey Skies: A War of the Worlds Story*. After the game's release, Seedhouse was distracted by "personal issues" and only noticed its tanking reviews after two years. He wants to redeem it, though: the game's getting a free remaster. ■ **JW**



AI AYE

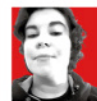
'LET'S GET WILD'



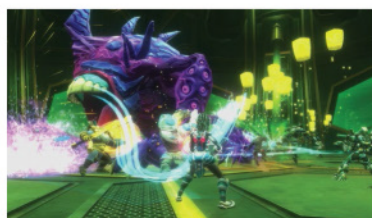
A UN press stunt saw AI-enabled robots lined up for a press conference in which they assured us they had no plans to conquer Earth. That is until a popstar robot called Desdemona turned around and said, to nervous laughter, "Let's get wild and make this world our playground." ■ **RS**

WORM THROUGH

CHATGPT'S EVIL TWIN



With ne'er-do-wells sidestepping the ethical limitations on ChatGPT to design malicious code and the like, there's been an increase in crackdowns. So, someone designed a ChatGPT antithesis: WormGPT, for all things nefarious. It designs malware and phishing emails. ■ **KW**



ABOVE: It gets especially bizarre when classic games have existing, perfectly good PC versions (like *OutRun 2*) that you just can't buy any more.

preservation, in a medium where the platforms themselves vanish along with their titles. The US Copyright Office's remote-access exemptions for archived works "explicitly leave out videogames". Even videogame researchers and historians have to travel just to play games that are otherwise impossible to buy.

The foundation then goes on to cite examples of industry campaigning against preservation efforts: in 2015, the Entertainment Software Association (ESA) argued that there's "no such thing as an obsolete game".

Then again in 2021, the ESA argued again that the preservation of videogames was "addressed adequately" by the current exemptions, something which the Video Game History Foundation throws into harsh doubt.

The debate around preservation hits close to home for most gamers. Just in this past month, I've written about both *Wildstar* and *A Realm Online*; the former you can't play anymore, and the latter had the dial completely reset on a bunch of quality-of-life improvements due to IP holder stonewalling. Even one of my favourite MMOs, *City of Heroes*, was completely inaccessible until a private server became public in 2019. Finally putting together how dire the situation is in concrete numbers is one step closer to making sure no game gets left behind. ■

Harvey Randall

Highs & Lows



HIGHS

BattleBit

Battlebit has become an instant smash on Steam.

Iran's COD

FPS *Revenge* has been announced as "Iran's *Call of Duty*" and will be all about destroying the US and NATO.

Comeback kid

Final Fantasy XIV streamer Pint beat the game's oldest speedrun record. Then the OG holder reappeared, beat the new record, and left.

NSFL

Pornographic mods for *Skyrim* using AI to replicate voice actors' talents.

Scenes

PC Gamer awarded *Plumbers Don't Wear Ties* 3 out of 100 in 1994, and now it's getting a remaster.

Tiny Violin

WoW Classic troll TinyViolin69 spent a year inveigling themselves with a max-level team, before deliberately misstepping on a boss and leaving the team perma-dead.

LOWS



The Spy

■ BUT WHO WATCHES THE SPY?

The Spy has reported from the shadows during many revolutions, human or otherwise. Indeed, The Spy will take what The Spy saw during the great penguin revolution of 2023 to The Spy's grave.

The Spy's deployment vehicle of choice for revolution reportage? VTOL all the way. Not only do these twin-bladed choppers look super cool, but they also allow for last-minute conversations to take place with The Spy while The Spy responds in one of The Spy's trademark gravelly voices.

After all, there's one thing that The Spy has learned during almost 30 years of infiltrating events, a gravelly voice is not just desired, but is expected by all concerned. Think Solid Snake, think JC Denton, think Adam Jensen... the list goes on.

Which is why when the news that a new *Deus Ex* game is incoming and that, right now, it does not involve the gravelly voiced vocal talents of Adam Jensen's voice actor in *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* and *Deus Ex: Mankind Divided*, Elias Toufexis, The Spy's augmented smart ears started flashing red.

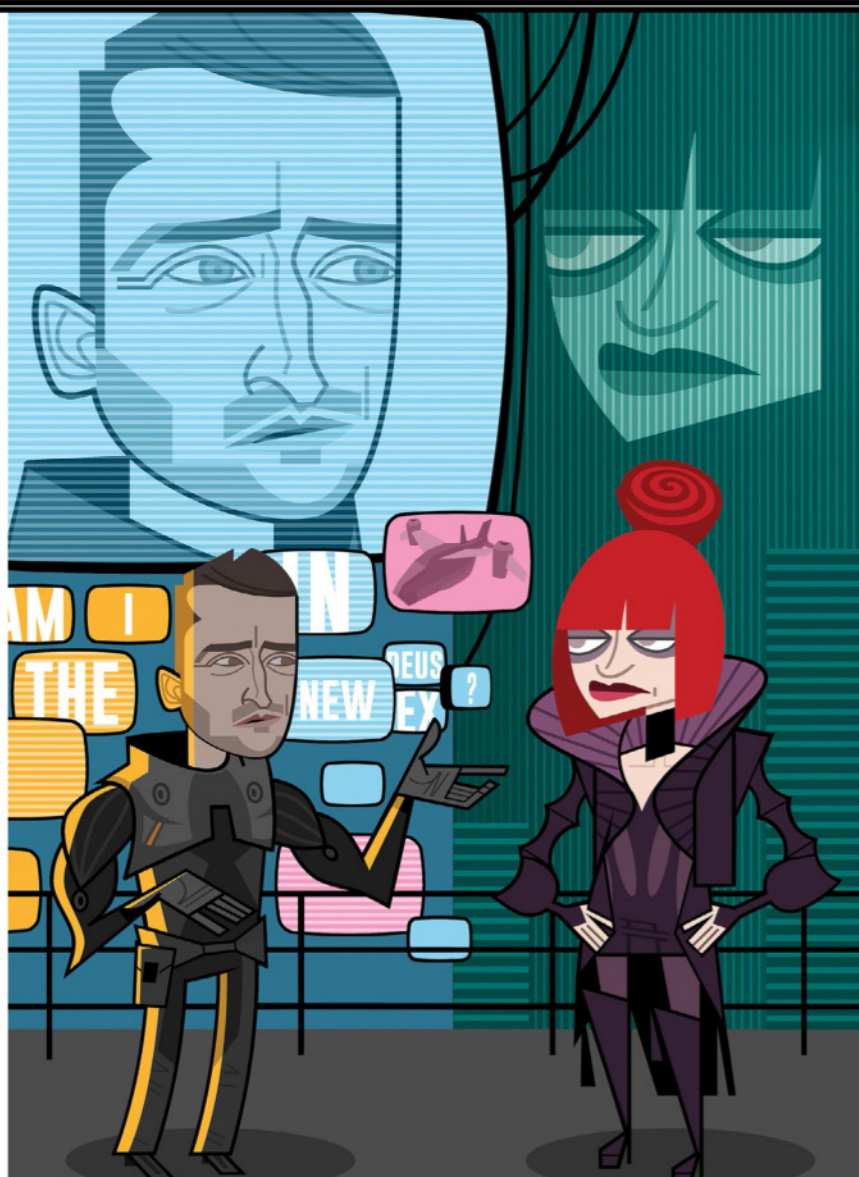
DEUS EX VOX

The Spy first got wind that a new *Deus Ex* game is incoming back in August 2022, with The Spy utilising The Spy's subdermal cloak augmentation to eavesdrop on Embracer Group's revolutionary buyout of *Deus Ex: HR* and *MD* developer, Eidos Montreal.

During a post-buyout planning meeting, The Spy heard the holding group deciding that it wanted its new studio to "immediately get into *Deus Ex*" and, excitingly for PC gamers, Embracer wanted Eidos Montreal "to do what *Cyberpunk 2077* couldn't".

Then, during a slightly later deployment late last year The Spy overheard Jason Schrier confirm that "a new *Deus Ex*" is incoming but that it is "very, very early" in development.

Fast forward to July this year and The Spy saw a memo from Toufexis stating that, "As happy as I am to be busy, I wish I was even more busy on a new *Deus Ex*. I am not under any NDA for *Deus Ex* because no one has called me about it. Truly."



On the face of it, this sounds like bad news for PC gamers. Toufexis did an incredible job voicing augmented series' protagonist Adam Jensen in both HR and MD, so the idea that he won't be returning to voice the character is worrying. And, if Toufexis isn't involved, that also raises the possibility that the new *Deus Ex* game is going to move on from the Jensen story altogether, with the series never getting its very-much-set-up third game.

After all, the truth is that *Mankind Divided* was released back in 2016, so it's already been seven years since the last game in the series came out, and if the data The Spy has extracted is accurate, that the new *Deus Ex* game is only in "very, very early" development, PC gamers may be looking at a release date that is going on ten years later.

Whether or not Toufexis and Jensen return, though, the fact that the *Deus Ex* series is going to be augmented with a new game is a nugget of positivity in these dark, *Deus Ex*-free times. And, well, if Eidos Montreal is looking for a new *Deus Ex* protagonist voice actor, The Spy knows someone with plenty of gravelly-voiced experience. Spy out. ■
The Spy

**"I AM NOT UNDER ANY
NDA FOR DEUS EX
BECAUSE NO ONE HAS
CALLED ME ABOUT IT"**



THE SPY
The Spy is a master of gravelly voices and VTOL deployments.

CORE KEEPER

PAWS & CLAWS UPDATE



PLAY NOW ON
STEAM!



Special Report

PCG INVESTIGATES



A CRT display adds an extra layer of authenticity for those classic DOS games.

CATHODE RAY MOOD

Why you should add a **CRT** to your PC setup this year

After budgeting out the next tier of upgrades for my PC, the total cost of my new components had me endlessly second-guessing every pound spent. So I went in the opposite direction. I bought a CRT, instead. Why? Let me explain.

If you've done a cursory search on what modern gaming on a CRT looks like in the 2020s, you might have come across a deep dive by Digital Foundry. It's a great video, and outlines some of the technical benefits of a CRT display – vibrant, vivid colours that truly pop, with deep blacks and blinding whites that LCDs can only dream of. A responsiveness and motion clarity still unmatched today by most hi-refresh flatscreens. That Digital Foundry video shows off the Sony FW900, the Rolls Royce of CRT displays, capable of handling 4K resolution at 16:10.

You and I will likely never find a monitor that good without a Craigslist miracle, as they are exceedingly rare and ludicrously expensive. No, if you walk down this path, you will most likely be settling on something in the 900p range at 4:3, specs that don't necessarily dazzle on paper. But the experience of using a CRT to play PC games, especially fast-paced shooters, is so much better than the specs can convey – you feel like Milhouse playing Bonestorm.

Bunny-hopping from one shootout to another in *Dusk* felt nearly as good as it looked, with the contrasting saturated and desaturated extremes of its art design exploding with rich colour tones and deep shadows. The same went for grimdark counterparts *Warhammer 40,000 Boltgun* and *Darktide* – where *Boltgun*'s blues and magentas were overpowering, the depth of the browns, blacks, and greens in *Darktide* had the image looking like it had been doused in industrial grime. *Hotline Miami*'s pulsing backgrounds were like tsunamis of liquid neon pouring out of the glass like a broken aquarium.

DUMPSTER DIVING

Even getting one of these things is a hurdle, though. Because of their size and age, it makes the most sense to buy and pick up locally, which means poking around for a community in your area. When I decided I wanted to hunt down an old monitor, I joined a local vintage computer parts group and asked an admin for some tips on where to start looking for a 19-inch CRT. I totally lucked out when he said he had one he was about to list for \$80. If you're looking to bag one for yourself, it's worth keeping an eye on those big e-waste recycling bins you see at the local mall every now and again – you may not even have to spend any cash. Facebook marketplace and other listings sites are great spots too, especially when you



Old is New Again

I don't think you're really getting the most mileage out of your ancient monitor unless you're running ancient games on it. Having a CRT is a perfect excuse to get into emulation, dust off those old .ISO files on your C drive, or pick up a recent remaster of a classic game on steam. Turn off the gaudy anti-aliasing and cheap CRT effects in the video options, because you've got the real deal.



FAR LEFT: Playing modern boomer shooters on a CRT is great.



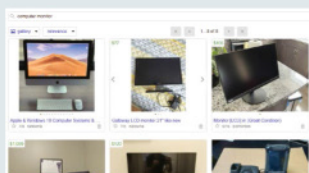
LEFT: Integrating a CRT into a modern setup can be awkward, but it's a show-stopping centrepiece.

TEST YOUR LUCK *Where to find a CRT*



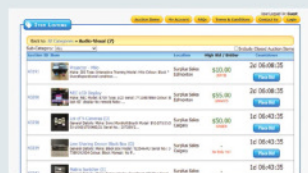
FACEBOOK GROUPS

Try to find a local vintage gaming or computer group. Better to deal with enthusiasts than scalpers.



CRAIGSLIST

It's a longshot, but the search terms 'old computer' or 'old monitor' can occasionally yield good results.



UNIVERSITY AUCTIONS

Nonstop budget cuts mean some CRT's are retiring from lifelong public service careers for pennies on the dollar.



RECYCLING CENTRES

You can sometimes find these in the trash. You may need to give them a whack to get the colours right, though.

search with the keywords 'old computer monitor'. When I had finally set everything up (and properly configured the RGB balance), I basked in the full glory of yesteryear's technology, the CRT filter options in *Hotline Miami* and emulators immediately made redundant. One of the first games I rushed to boot up was *Armored Core 3* (emulated through PCSX2), a long overdue replay in advance of the upcoming *Armored Core 6*. The CRT melted away a lot of the jagged low-res 'details' mapped onto the exposed surfaces of the mecha, now giving more of an impression of rivets, sensors, and panels rather than the masses of pixels actually conveying them.

With a kind of built-in anti-aliasing, on high-end PC games this frees up significant GPU muscle that can be directed towards texture quality, lighting, or resolution, running the notoriously unoptimised *Darktide* at 1050p with most of the post-processing disabled produced a noticeably more appealing image on a CRT than on my LCD monitors, and giving me a few extra much needed frames. I had the same experience with *Cyberpunk 2077* – soaking in the iridescent electric blues, greens, and magentas of Night City was so transformative I wound up replaying the whole game over the course of a week.

There are, of course, very significant drawbacks and compromises with CRTs, too. I decided to test latency by playing through the back half of the marvellous *Bayonetta* PC port and was bombarded with impossible-to-dodge off-screen attacks. The screen responsiveness was great, but the game logic doesn't account for your aspect ratio

when determining the aggressiveness of enemy AI, an unexpected example of software incompatibility. If you're eco-conscious or subject to a pricey power bill already, you also have the garish power draw to keep in mind.

OLD-SCHOOL COOL

But there's a real charm underneath all the hassle that's earned this beast a place in my setup. Powering up my CRT feels heavy and deliberate, like I'm firing up the engines of the *Nostromo*. The power button sinks deep into the chassis, like the priming agent for an electro-chemical palantir encased in yellowed, cigarette-stained plastic. When the screen comes to life, it's a slow trickle of brownish greens and blues slowly finding the right hues, blossoming into this vibrant, iridescent fuzz. An ear-piercing discharge of electrons drops to a low whine, a constant reminder that

there's something moving behind the glass.

CRTs are too few and far between to be the first choice for those who want to be on the cutting edge of high refresh, high resolution displays, but for the hobbyist with a budget build and open -mind, I think it's seriously worth considering one. My monitor found its niche as a dedicated emulation and retro FPS display, occasionally running the odd pixel art indie game or '90's anime movie in Media Player Classic. I loved having something that concretely anchored me to the history of PC gaming, and like building my own PC, it required its own level of tuning and finesse to get the most out of. ■

Noah Smith

I BASKED IN THE FULL GLORY OF YESTERYEAR'S TECHNOLOGY

Secret Level

THE UNSUNG HEROES OF DEVELOPMENT

FUN GUY

Smushi Come Home developer **NOAH LONE** on making a game solo

Noah Lone (AKA somehumbleonion) studied computer science at college... and hated it. Until his final semester that is, when the class was allowed to make anything for a web programming project. So he decided to try to make a game. "It just like, completely changed my life," he says.

This first game was a simple pixel art platformer, but it sparked an instant passion for game development that only grew more powerful as time went on. After graduating college, he turned down a full-time job at his employer (where he provided IT support for a software company), choosing instead to keep part-time hours so he could keep working on game development. Six months after that, he quit the job entirely.

"It was a big, risky decision," he admits. "And there's no guarantee you make any money off the game either." He had some savings to keep him going, but he's also grateful to his dad for supporting this decision, and allowing him to live in his house rent free. Lone's keen to stress that he got where he is thanks to help and support from other people, many within the indie community.

Although he's essentially self-taught, leaning heavily on YouTube tutorials, he's also found help and advice from other developers invaluable. "The devs are just so open, which is something I love about being indie. We're all just sharing our own knowledge publicly and willing to help each other out." With a published game under his belt, Lone finds himself able to help out others, too.

It wasn't a straight jump from college to Steam's front page, though. His first home-developed game was a café simulator. Although never finished, he burned himself out making it, to the point where it slammed his health. "At one point, I just physically collapsed one night, and it was a big wake-up call for me," he explains. He slowed down, then, taking time to learn new tools and practice his skills making small games.

SCRATCHING THE ITCH.IO

For *Smushi*, Lone brought in composer Failpositive for the music; but everything else in terms of PC development, he did by himself. "It's just so much work doing everything

on your own," he says, "but having that total freedom, not having to run anything by other people; it makes it totally worth it." He's open to working with others in the future, which would offset some of the cons.

"If you're an indie dev, you are an artist, and being an artist, one of the coolest things is to just see your creations come to life [sometimes I would] wish I had an artist that was working on [characters]. So I could continue the programming and then when they're done, they can just hand me the models and I can just program them in, I wish I had a programmer and I could just work on the models."

One remarkable thread running through Lone's story, is the importance of social media. TikTok and Instagram have proven important sources of sales and wishlists, but Twitter has a strong indie development community. DMs were an essential part of reaching out for advice. It's also thanks to promoting *Smushi* during development via social media, that Wholesome Games and publishers approached him, rather than the other way around.

Lone has some advice for any other indie developers out there. "Please start small," he says. "Make sure that you are taking things bit by bit, because indie development is a giant bite. So start small, don't rely on motivation. You have to stay passionate about your idea. And then that will allow you to stay disciplined. [Eric Barone] says you have to truly convince yourself that you are going to finish this game, and that it's going to work out. Not in an egotistical way; just to prevent that self doubt. Because self doubt is the indie game killer." ■

Luke Kemp

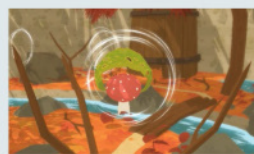
TAKE SMUSHI HOME

Four reasons you won't get spored



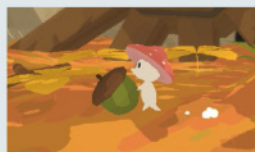
HUMOUR

This is a funny game. Who would've guessed mushrooms can make you giggle?



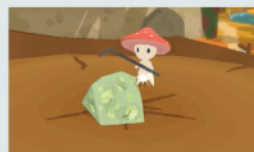
VARIETY

You'll be jumping, sure; but you'll also be chatting, climbing, gliding, swimming and exploring.



PUZZLES

Smushi is full of puzzles. If something catches your eye, it probably leads to something else.

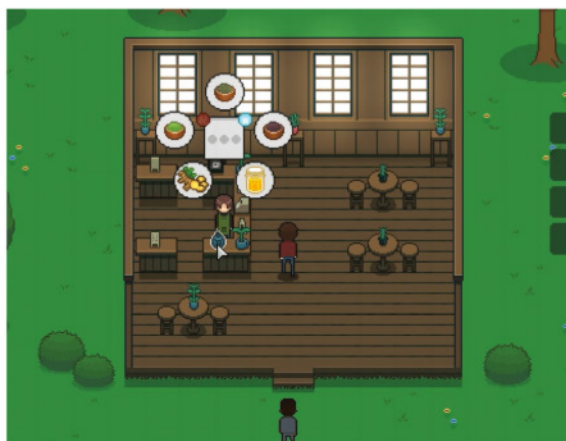
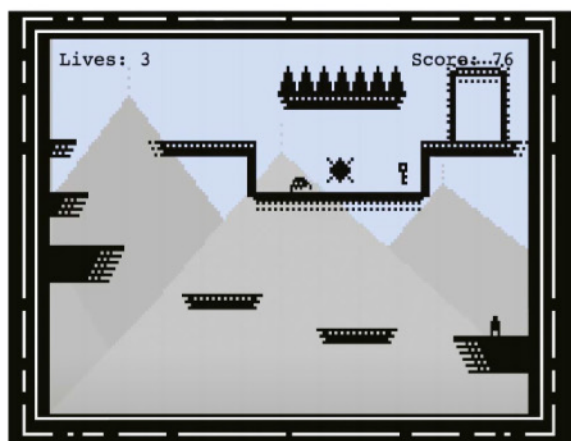


COLLECTIBLES

Who doesn't enjoy hoovering up currency, eh? Sometimes, you get to smash something for them.



TIKTOK AND INSTAGRAM HAVE PROVEN IMPORTANT SOURCES OF SALES

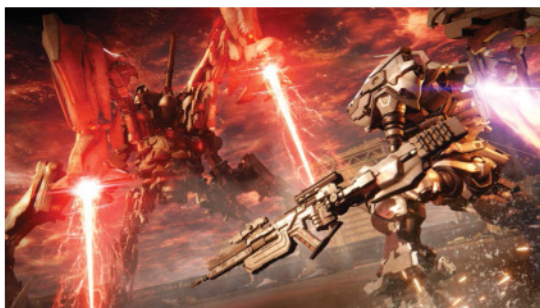


ABOVE: A screenshot from an early version of *Smushi Come Home*.

FAR LEFT: A shot from Lone's very first game, made during his college course.

LEFT: The unfinished cafe simulator. *Stardew Valley* was a big influence.

3 months



ARMORED CORE VI: FIRES OF RUBICON

RELEASE August 24, 2023 | **DEVELOPER** FromSoftware Inc

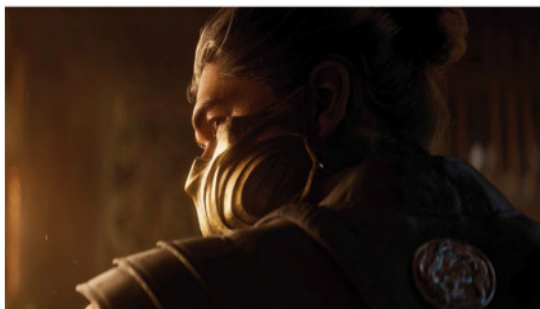
After an 11-year gap the *Armored Core* series returns, promising even more massive stompy mechs, dazzling new graphics and an epic story set in a dying star system.



STARFIELD

RELEASE September 6, 2023 | **DEVELOPER** Bethesda Game Studios

We now have a confirmed release date for *Starfield*, with the open world 'Skyrim in space' RPG dropping in early September. Start planning your character now.



MORTAL KOMBAT 1

RELEASE September 19, 2023 | **DEVELOPER** Netherrealm Studios

The reborn *Mortal Kombat* universe created by the Fire God Liu Kang promises plenty of opportunities to gruesomely finish your foes.

6 months



ASSASSIN'S CREED: MIRAGE

RELEASE October 1, 2023 | **DEVELOPER** Ubisoft Montreal

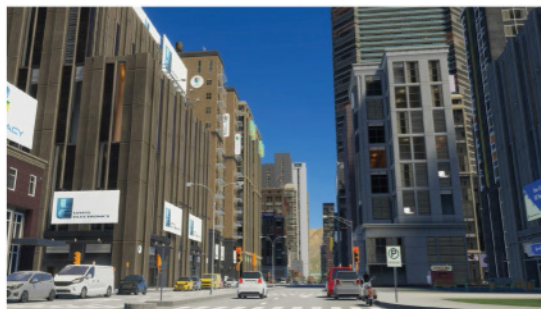
The series returns to its roots, with a stealth-orientated game taking you back to ninth-century Baghdad. You play as thief-turned-assassin Basim.



ALAN WAKE 2

RELEASE October 17, 2023 | **DEVELOPER** Remedy Entertainment

The long-awaited sequel promises more survival and psychological horrors, rejoining the story 13 years after Alan Wake went missing.

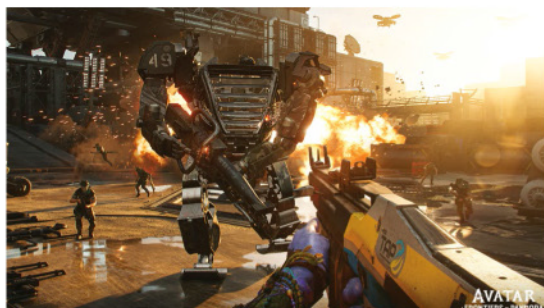


CITIES: SKYLINES 2

RELEASE October 24, 2023 | **DEVELOPER** Colossal Order Ltd

The much-anticipated sequel to arguably the best city-building sandbox ever created arrives in late October. Create a thriving metropolis from the ground up.

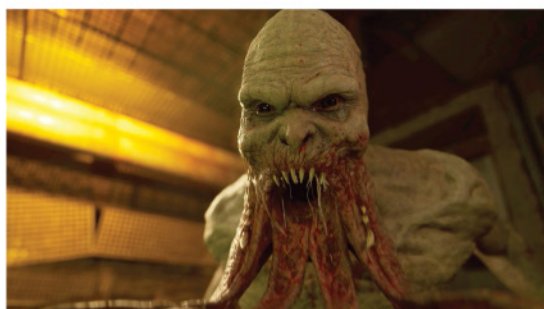
9 months



AVATAR: FRONTIERS OF PANDORA

RELEASE December 7, 2023 | **DEVELOPER** Massive Entertainment

With *Far Cry*-style first-person combat as well as third-person adventuring and beast-riding, this open world action adventure is going big.



STALKER 2: HEART OF CHORNOBYL

DEVELOPER December 2023 | **PUBLISHER** GSC Game World

The long-awaited return to the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone is set for December this year, although no concrete release date has been announced.



WARHAMMER 40,000: SPACE MARINE 2

DEVELOPER 2023 | **PUBLISHER** Saber Interactive

It's time to grab your chainsword and Thunder Hammer, and get rending and crushing orks, tyrannids and more. Action-packed, gore-soaked sequel incoming in 2023.

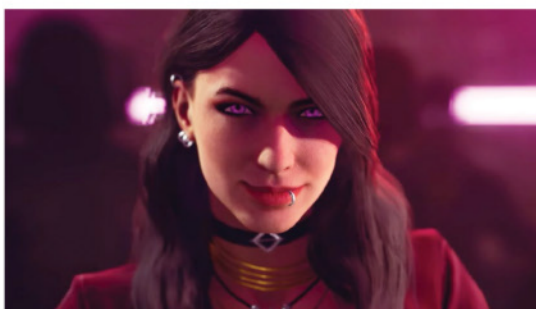
12 months+



HOMEWORLD 3

RELEASE February, 2024 | **DEVELOPER** Blackbird Interactive

The new game in the classic sci-fi series has slipped out of 2023 into 2024, but still promises to deliver a stunning space-based RTS.



VAMPIRE: THE MASQUERADE - BLOODLINES 2

RELEASE Unknown | **DEVELOPER** Paradox Interactive

With its original developer binned off in 2021, the current state of *Bloodlines 2* remains a mystery. Will we see the RPG return from the dead in the next 12 months?



DEATH STRANDING 2

RELEASE Unknown | **DEVELOPER** Kojima Productions

The sequel to Hideo Kojima's critically acclaimed action adventure game/walking simulator *Death Stranding* is incoming, but with no fixed release date so far.

LISTEN NOW

The all-new PC Gamer podcast is now available to listen to, with hosts Mollie Taylor and Lauren Morton, as well as various special guests, talking all things PC gaming. From new game reveals and announcements, to trailer breakdowns, celebrity chit chat, spicy debates and the latest developments in PC gaming culture, the PC Gamer podcast is well worth adding to your feed list. shorturl.at/afrJN



PREVIEW





NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
August 25

DEVELOPER
FromSoftware

PUBLISHER
Bandai Namco

LINK
PlayArmoredCore.com

ARMORED CORE 6

Not Robot Souls, or Elden Mech, but a fascinating third thing

Despite repeated promises from studio and publisher alike, I went into my hands-on with the hope that it would be *Souls* with robots. I don't want a *Souls*-with-robots game; it's more that I will play a *Souls*-with-X game, made by FromSoftware, as a matter of priority over anything else. *Armored Core*, though? I went in curious, but far from sold.

What I played was a fluid, intense fast mech combat game that resembled the last and only *Armored Core* game I ever played, *Armored Core 5*. Except prettier. And better. And faster. As dim as those memories are, I do remember admiring its bleak far-future sci-fi, while also being upset that it bore no resemblance to the dark fantasy RPG that the same studio released the year before. I dropped it pretty quick.

Armored Core 6 is gorgeously grim: in the areas I saw, endless minuscule neighbourhoods of Soviet-style tower blocks are couched within inhospitable snow-drenched landscapes, surrounded by yards of steely industry, all shadowed by gargantuan skybound tech structures of such Byzantine architecture that they resemble something verging on biblical. Art direction, in true FromSoftware style, seems hellbent on making you feel tiny, even while you're crushing forests of fir trees on the way to your quarry. This strange scale-dilation is something almost unique to From, and it's the first thing I noticed about *Armored Core*. You're big compared to the trampled IRL-sized

trucks that bounce like tennis balls underfoot, but the structures that loom above you are godlike. There's a grandeur to it all, but not much serenity: this is a loud game. Everything is always exploding, and between explosions, blockbuster-style American barks command you to your next target. I'm put in mind, weirdly, of *Battlefield*.

HEAVY METAL

I think *Armored Core* could be a big deal. Not on the scale of *Elden Ring*, but it's got a lot to offer. It's a skill-oriented robo-action game with a robust customisation element which is really a lot more important – and a lot more fun – than I could ever have hoped. Most importantly, this is a mech game where movement and player technique feels as important as it might in *Sekiro*, or even a *Devil May Cry*. But let's go through the rhythm of the game so you're very clear what you're getting with *Armored Core*.

Missions are selected from a menu, and take place in large maps. You'll return to these maps for different missions, albeit with different spawn points, in a manner reminiscent of *Nioh*. In my demo, missions unlocked two at a time. Each starts with a scene-setting briefing, and some can be knocked over in less than five minutes, with simple formats like "destroy these three objectives" or "thug up this one target".

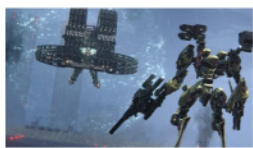
Don't be alarmed, though: they're not all like that. Among these were interspersed some genuinely breathtaking missions that, in the hands of another studio, might just be handled via cutscene. In one, I'm off to a desert wasteland to take down a 'Weaponized Mining Ship' called a Strider, which could better be described as an utterly gargantuan dog-shaped robot. Think *Elden Ring*'s Walking Mausoleum. Now think six of 'em stuck together, and six more layered on top: it's bloody massive. Upon approach I must dodge its languorous defence, and then once in range attack some exposed machinery on one of its legs to effectively kneecap it. Its collapse is glacial in its majesty.

When the dust settles – literally – I've got to scale this heavenward Strider to bring it down properly, which involves navigating its elaborate exterior without

PLAYED
IT

STRUCTURES OF SUCH
BYZANTINE ARCHITECTURE
THAT THEY VERGE ON BIBLICAL

Armored Core 6



✦ plummeting to my death. Like the *Souls* games, *Armored Core* doesn't mind indulging in some high stakes platforming, which can be tricky in a boost-happy slippery mech. I hunt down its weak spots, evade incoming ballistics and finally destroy the giant electrical orb that seems to constitute its heart.

This is a boss battle of brilliant spectacle. Less so is the one in the tutorial: a chunky helicopter. Still, it teaches you an important lesson about *Armored Core*: your robot may be equipped with some projectile attacks but you're not a plane, you're a mech, and so you're also going to want to get in close. Using the high speed Assault Boost in conjunction with a melee attack proved much more effective against the chopper than the technique I used the first couple of times, which was to stand back, shoot and dodge.

Once a mission is complete, you're thrown back to the menu, where you'll be allowed to spend your hard-earned coin on upgrades for your AC. There's no immersive-but-cumbersome hub area: FromSoftware has drawn the loop as tight as can be. Go out, fuck shit up, then go home and fiddle in some menus to optimise your fuck-upping capacity. If a mission proves too difficult, it's probably because your loadout sucks: back to the menu with you, to find a better build.

MECH BANK

Each mission nets you money, which you'll use to buy new parts for your Armored Core. There are 12 discrete components of your AC that can be swapped in and out with specialised gear: both left and right arms and shoulders have weapons, including assault, pulse and plasma rifles, blades and homing missiles. But your arms can be replaced too, your legs, even your head. Coupled with the extensive cosmetic options there's a lot of potential for freak flag waving. Each purchased component is yours to keep and swap in and out between missions as you see fit, but you can also sell them.

Your AC can charge at delightfully fun speeds using the Assault Boost, and the booster type you use will determine its speed and energy (EN) consumption. The generator you use will determine the

charge's length and regen rate, though right out of the gate the regeneration is quick: you're looking at a second. This stamina-bar stand-in is really there to emphasise the distinction between fighter jet and mech. Energy also affects your AC's ability to ascend, glide and dodge. Most decisions I made pertaining to AC loadout centred around weight. Like the *Souls* game's equip load stat, exceeding this threshold makes your agile corporate death machine vastly inferior.

HARD CORE

For the bulk of the three hours I played I felt like this might be a relatively easy game by FromSoftware standards. The variety caught me unaware: during the eighth mission I played, which begins at the foot of what appears to be an enormous retaining wall, I'm tasked with fighting my way to a door in its centre. I'd blazed through most encounters with dodging and ballistics spamming, but this time I was getting decimated.

While not quite an infiltration mission – you're a mech, and loud! – this one required me to think carefully about my path to that door, keeping in mind each piece of scant cover, as well as the rockets poised all the way along the wall's crest. Before this moment *Armored Core* had felt almost easy, but it served to emphasise a crucial element in its design: the mastery of your mech's finer movement capabilities. It put me in mind of *Tony Hawk Pro Skater*. The ensuing boss drove this point home further. I had to face off against a Juggernaut – a two-phase 'boots on the ground' style boss that resembles a kind of cybergoth road grader. The space during this encounter was relatively limited, and verticality didn't really factor into it. I needed to get behind it, regularly, precisely, without skidding too far or falling too short. It was tough: previously I'd been playing this game like *Twisted Metal*.

I loved my time with *Armored Core 6*, even though I set out wanting something else. The promise of PvP in concert with the modular approach to construction has me excited too. While I wonder whether some of the shorter, more frivolous missions could wear over the course of a campaign, I always enjoyed commanding my AC, and quickly understood that every buck in my wallet would count. I went in with the futile hope that *Armored Core* would be *Robot Souls*. I came out very happy that it's just *Armored Core*.

Shaun Prescott



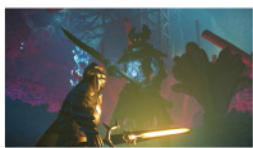
EACH MISSION NETS YOU MONEY, WHICH YOU'LL USE TO BUY NEW PARTS



ABOVE: AC6 is unrelentingly loud and intense; don't expect much quiet time out in the field.

LEFT: The first boss is a chopper: you'll need to meet it on its own territory (in the sky).

Enshrouded



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE

2023 (Early Access)

DEVELOPER

Keen Games

PUBLISHER

In-house

LINK

enshrouded.com

ENSHROUDED

Zelda meets Valheim in this co-op fantasy RPG

If you'd asked me last week if I wanted to live in a house built on a boulder sculpted to look like a giant's skull I'd have said, "No, not really, not quite my thing," and then spent several hours wondering what was wrong with you. That's a deeply weird question to ask someone.

But after seeing the voxel-based building tools in *Enshrouded*, the upcoming co-op survival RPG developer Keen Games describes as *Valheim* meets *Zelda*, I have to admit... yes, I think I do want to live in a house built on a boulder sculpted to look like a giant's skull. And I apologise for criticising your question so harshly. That wasn't cool of me!

In *Enshrouded*, which will enter Early Access on Steam later this year, you explore a dangerous realm where a deadly fog has crept in to cover almost everything, mutating creatures caught within it and giving rise to hideous monsters. Above the fog on safer ground, you can hunt, gather resources and build yourself a home.

Despite what looks like character classes (rogues, warriors, mages, and so on) you're not forced to pick a specific class at the start of the game. You can unlock skills from an open-ended skill tree and specialise in different styles of play. If you want to dabble in stealth and archery, with a bit of magic and swordplay thrown in, you can unlock skills from any branch you want. You won't be restricted or forced down a certain path.

DABBLE IN STEALTH AND ARCHERY, WITH A BIT OF MAGIC AND SWORDPLAY THROWN IN

HOME BASE

I'm definitely down with killing monsters, exploring the world and using grappling hooks and wingsuits to get around, but the base-building system in *Enshrouded* has me more interested than anything else. Building can be done in a completely freeform fashion where you get to shape and mould every last inch of your base, or you can use pre-made templates to build floors, walls and other structures. The voxel system lets you smooch walls, pillars and floors together, and it all winds up looking nice and seamless, and once you've built something you can alter it just about any way you want.

That's where the system is really flexible, and what's especially nice is that it looks like the building tools can tell whether you're making something like an arrow slit, or a window, or a doorway, by the way it quickly styles the opening you've just made. Windows look like windows, doorways look like doorways. It's an impressive and fluid system that gives me hope that my base might wind up looking nice even though I'm not much of a builder.

It's not just buildings that are made of voxels, it's everything. Want to create a tunnel through a mountainside? Grab a pickaxe and start swinging it. Want to add a basement under your castle? Carve out all that rock and dirt and start building walls, then decorate it how you like. And that boulder shaped like a skull I mentioned earlier? You can do that too. I'm already itching to make myself a cool castle with a dungeon beneath it, and the game isn't even out yet.

Your base isn't just for you and your friends but also NPCs. While you're out adventuring you'll come across characters like hunters, blacksmiths, and alchemists. Once you've rescued them from the shroud you can build them rooms in your base, place items like workbenches for them, and summon them with a magic staff. They'll then live there with you, help you with crafting, and give you quests to complete.

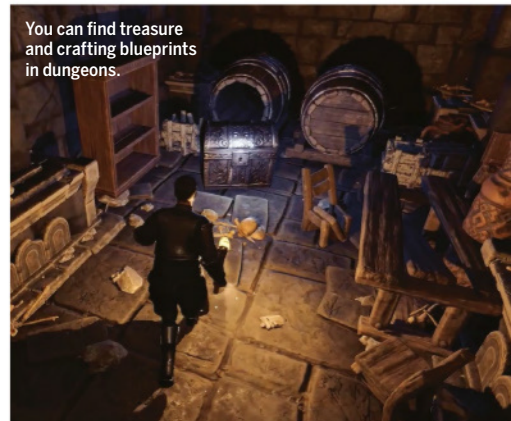
So far *Enshrouded* is looking pretty darn good. If you loved building a cosy base in *Valheim* or *Minecraft*, it's one to definitely keep an eye on.

Christopher Livingston

FIRST
LOOK



You can find treasure and crafting blueprints in dungeons.





ABOVE: Start with nothing, then build up your skills and base.

LEFT: Ranger skills will come in handy for long distance combat.

Six Days in Fallujah

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
June 22, 2023

DEVELOPER
Highwire Games

PUBLISHER
Victura

LINK
shorturl.at/hxAV8

SIX DAYS
IN FALLUJAH

The once controversial milisim is finally out in Early Access

What I love about milsims like *Squad*, *Hell Let Loose* and *Foxhole* is becoming a small cog in a massive cooperative effort. I love the difficult guns, overwhelming audio, the high stakes of catching even a single bullet and the intensity of teammates who are buying into the roleplay as much as I am.

Sometimes I notice a disconnect between me and my milsim teammates when it becomes clear (typically over voice chat while riding in the back of an APC) that one or two of them aren't just fans of close-knit tactics, they're devoted lovers of military culture who believe US forces can do no wrong.

There is perhaps no game that better represents that disconnect than *Six Days in Fallujah*, a milsim FPS that depicts the second battle of Fallujah between American Marines (and US coalition forces that included the Iraqi army) and the Iraqi insurgency, a real and devastating battle that took place over six weeks beginning in November 2004.

During that battle, it is estimated that up to 2,000 Iraqi insurgency fighters were killed, along with 107 coalition forces and up to 800 civilians, too. The battle resulted in the American-led coalition taking control of the area, as well as also capturing 1,500 insurgent fighters. Following the Iraq War, the battle was described as "some of the heaviest urban combat US military have been involved in".

This is actually the second attempt at making *Six Days* – the original project

collapsed in 2009 after its controversial setting attracted negative attention, and Konami decided not to publish it. A decade later, the man behind the first attempt, Bungie vet Peter Tamte, decided to try again under his own publishing label with developer Highwire Games.

A HIGHWIRE ACT

The new iteration of *Six Days in Fallujah*, announced in 2021, promises to be a responsible interpretation of the battle that depicts not only the American perspective, but also the perspectives of Iraqi civilians, both in the game's singleplayer campaign and through documentary segments played between missions. Just like in 2009, Tamte's insistence that the game isn't trying to be political commentary – an impossible thing for a game steeped in war to do – hasn't instilled confidence in critics that it'll present a realer or more accurate depiction of the US invasion of Iraq.

Now having played the Early Access release of *Six Days in Fallujah* that released on Steam for £32.99 last week, I'm even less convinced Highwire can pull that off.

PLAYED
IT

UNFIT FOR DUTY

Six Days' singleplayer campaign, the part that claims to tell a nuanced story, doesn't exist yet. The *Six Days in Fallujah* you can buy right now is a collection of four disconnected co-op missions focused on American soldiers doing everything by the book. The missions can only be played online, there's no friendly AI, no progression and literally no choice in which missions you play or what role on the squad you're assigned. It's a bit like the *SWAT* successor *Ready or Not*, but with a lot less to do.

The only thing you can count on in *Six Days in Fallujah* at the moment is that every mission is more or less the same. Whether the ultimate goal is to destroy a weapons cache or secure a mortar site, between you is a city block's worth of buildings with insurgents hiding in them.

The map layouts and enemy placements are procedurally generated, so you can't just memorise a golden path, but a grid of slightly different square buildings than the last six missions gets boring pretty fast. The only part of *Six*

THE MAP LAYOUTS AND
ENEMY PLACEMENTS ARE
PROCEDURALLY GENERATED



The devs reportedly interviewed 28 Iraqi civilians in making the game.

PREVIEW

Six Days in Fallujah

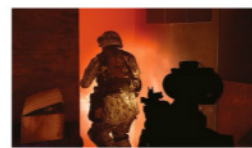
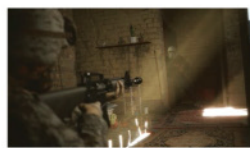
RIGHT: *Six Days in Fallujah* is aiming for a realistic depiction of combat.

BELOW: Covering each other's backs is crucial.



Six Days in Fallujah

A lot of effort has been put into recreating war-torn Fallujah.



☞ Days that actually feels ready at the moment is its basic breach-and-clear combat.

Everything about the way your soldier controls is purpose-built for making building infiltrations as nerve-racking as possible: you walk very slowly by default, doors have to be slowly opened or breached, and it's so dark that you have to stay in ADS view, flashlight pointed forward, to see anything. Opening a door when you don't know what's on the other side is legitimately scary. Death comes quick enough that most of the time I was shooting at silhouettes and shadows in fear that they'd shoot at me first.

You're encouraged to use the game's built-in proximity chat to coordinate room clearings, cover each other's backs, and call for help. It's one of the better chat systems I've used in a milsim – proximity chat is on by default at all times, and pressing space bar occupies one of your hands to click your chest-mounted radio to speak over longer distances, preventing you from aiming. Voices echo only while indoors and radio calls crackle to an annoying, but perhaps authentic, degree.

REAL COMBAT

A few other realistic touches that I like: you don't know how many bullets are left in a magazine unless you manually check, a similar system to the *Red Orchestra* and *Rising Storm* series. In addition, when you get shot, you have to take cover and stand so your soldier can check if they're bleeding. If you're lucky, it was just a graze or absorbed by armour, but you have to confirm. Also, there are two ADS modes: one where you hold your gun low at your shoulder pointed forward, and a 'true' ADS mode that actually looks through iron sights but blocks your peripheral vision.

As a shooter, *Six Days* stands up pretty well against other milsims. But as a setting, there are some objectionable omissions in Highwire's rendition of Fallujah. The hundreds of Iraqi civilians who died in the battle are not depicted at all. The only other characters on the map, besides you and your American buds, are faceless insurgents to be exterminated.

Highwire does plan to add civilians in an early 2024 update (around the same time the campaign will arrive), but even in these disconnected co-op missions, their omission betrays the historical authenticity the game claims to value.

Were *Six Days in Fallujah* just another 'wargame' milsim devoid of context, it'd be easy to accept that it's picking and choosing which real-life tactics to simulate based on what's fun, but because *Six Days* tries so hard to sell itself as the true story of what happened in Fallujah, what's not in the simulation is all the more glaring. The game's official FAQ promises to show us what real combat was like in the battles of Fallujah, better than TV or movies have been able to accomplish.

A DEEPER ENGAGEMENT

"For generations, we've tried to understand combat by watching a TV or movie screen to see what happened to somebody else," states the developer on the official product page. "*Six Days in Fallujah* challenges you to solve these real-life situations for yourself. After all, if a picture is worth a thousand words, being there must be worth a million."

If Highwire really wants to paint a realistic picture of the US military's Fallujah campaign, then I expect to see its illegal use of white phosphorus. And maybe I should get to fire off a few of those depleted uranium rounds that've been linked to birth defects among Fallujah locals in the 20 years since the battle took place.

SINGLEPLAYER CAMPAIGN

Again, there is a chance *Six Days in Fallujah*'s planned singleplayer campaign will engage with its source material in a deeper way, but this opening salvo isn't a good impression. Highwire says it interviewed 28 Iraqi civilians in the making of *Six Days in Fallujah*, but the only two 'documentary' segments in the current build of the game (videos that roll in fullscreen before the game loads and when you select the co-op mode) place the focus squarely on US veterans. What I'm seeing is a game that's more interested in depicting American valour than the actual losers of the story it's telling: Fallujah.

There's just barely anything there in this Early Access debut. I've had my fill of its four missions after less than 90 minutes. For £32.99, you can do a lot better right now.

Morgan Park

AS A SHOOTER, SIX DAYS STANDS UP PRETTY WELL AGAINST OTHER MILSIMS

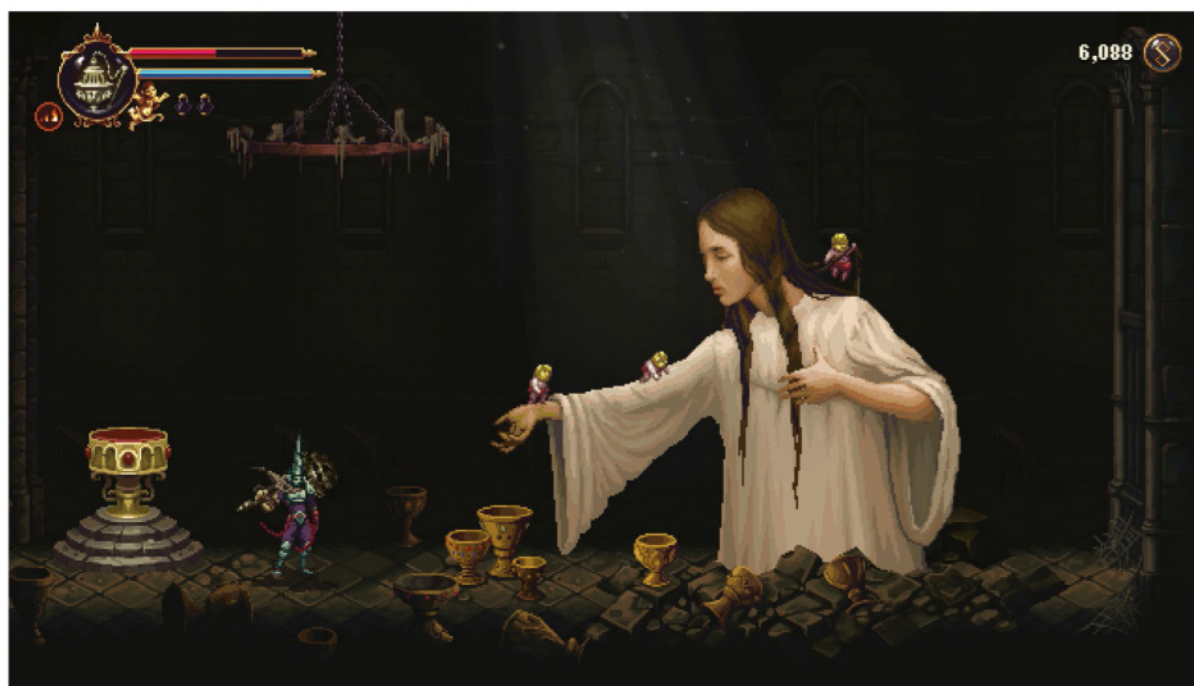
PREVIEW

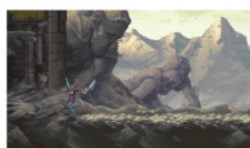
Blasphemous 2



ABOVE: Combat is fast and deadly.

RIGHT: Make an offering here to increase your health vials.





NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE

August 24, 2023

DEVELOPER

The Game Kitchen

PUBLISHER

Team 17

LINK

shorturl.at/ektu0

BLASPHEMOUS 2

Fight as penance in this sin-filled, gore-soaked Metroidvania

Blasphemous 2 is a Metroidvania with a very distinctive Spanish Catholic apocalypse *thang* going on. You play The Penitent One, who needs to do penance for something, and you do that in this game by gutting a series of nightmarish adversaries who are joining you in this distinctive hellscape but are not too pleased to see you.

There's plenty of Metroidvanias on the market today, but where *Blasphemous 2* piques the interest is in its strong visual and tonal feel, as well as its tight, addictive play mechanics. In terms of gameplay you've got a main attack, dodge, jump and block mechanics, as well as the ability to equip and make use of special powers. You hit hard but so do your enemies, and progress is checkpointed by shrines that you kneel at. When you die you're sent back to the last checkpoint.

You'll also come up across barriers to progress that can only be overcome when you've unlocked a certain power, or earned a specific object, often routing you through the game in specific patterns. Typical enemies are mulched easily, but when things get busy the challenge escalates, with crowd control being important. Sub-bosses and bosses tend to hit very hard, taking the player out with just a few hits. This is definitely not a platformer you can mash through.

Regarding combat, you select from one of three weapons at the start of the game, which vary in speed and damage,

again which is fairly typical for the genre. You can unlock more of these weapons as you progress through the game, such as I did by finding the Verdicto, a powerful ball on chain weapon with great reach. This complements the sword I chose at the start, and you can swap between them at will. Importantly, the weapon you use alters how you fight.

HELLISHLY PUNCHY VISUALS

Then there's *Blasphemous 2*'s aesthetic and overall tonal vibe, which is a very distinctive and singular Spanish Catholic apocalypse meets Terry Gilliam thing. At almost every point in the game the player is almost oppressively assaulted by some sort of often corrupted Christian iconography or imagery, which The Game Kitchen has clearly had plenty of fun with when it comes round to designing levels, characters and specifically bosses.

Indeed, right from the off, the game starts with The Penitent One rising from a grave positioned at the bottom of a scene taken right out of the Dante's Inferno.

Specifically the Gates of Hell depiction from it by famous French sculptor

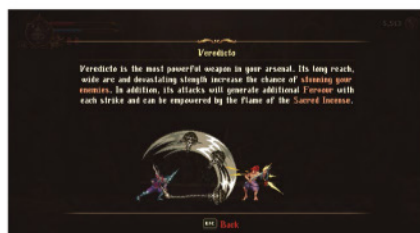
Auguste Rodin, with the coffin flanked with damned souls writing in pain and reaching up.

Crucially, though, there's that Gilliam-esque cartoony element, which punctures the visual misery in a way that imbues *Blasphemous 2*'s visuals with real character. It leads to an almost Disney's *Aladdin* on SNES-style experience, the world around you often looks based on the game's own gritty reality, but then it is punctuated by, say, a flying reliquary, or an urn with wings. There's almost a *Parodius*-level of corruption and exaggeration about *Blasphemous 2*'s art style, which lurches between the horrific and gothically Catholic, to the borderline comic and cartoony. It's a potent visual mix.

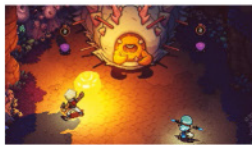
After playing *Blasphemous 2* for a few hours I'm really enthused by what I've seen. And what I've seen is memorable, that's for sure. More importantly, though, *Blasphemous 2* has become one of those games that, when I'm not playing it, I think about how I progress further in it, how I can not get my head caved in again by a boss. And for me, that always a good sign.

Robert Jones

YOU CAN UNLOCK MORE WEAPONS AS YOU PROGRESS THROUGH THE GAME



Raising and lowering sand. Useful, but also deadly.



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
August 29

DEVELOPER
Sabotage Studio

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
seaofstarsgame.co

SEA OF STARS

The Messenger's developer takes on the JRPG titans

I believe a good JRPG can be one of the cosiest experiences in gaming, and after playing the demo for *Sea of Stars*, I felt transported – *Ratatouille* style – back to my childhood playing on the Super Nintendo. I spoke to developer Sabotage about how it captured the spirit of the '90s classics so well.

French indie outfit Sabotage doesn't have a long, illustrious track record. Its first game, the *The Messenger*, was great, but still a far cry from a grand globe-trotting fantasy adventure like *Sea of Stars*. And yet, it's swinging for the fences with its second title, invoking some heavyweight classics in the genre and aiming to exceed them. From the short slice of the game I've played so far (a demo still available on Steam), I think it might be able to pull it off.

I roped in Thierry Boulanger (creative director and writer) and Michael 'Miko' Lavoie (environment artist) from Sabotage to walk me through some of the process that has gone into making this highly promising game. Unsurprising given the leap in graphical fidelity from *The Messenger* to *Sea of Stars*, but manpower was key.

"*The Messenger's* dev team was seven people. This time it's around 26. The plan with *The Messenger* was that if it works, we get to make 'The RPG'. It was a good bootstrap project for the company. Smaller scope, less risk and an easy sell. It feels like it all happened in the proper order of things," says Thierry.

PLAYED
IT

NOSTALGIA TRIP

While the demo skips on narrative introductions, jumping straight into an early town and dungeon, it wears its inspirations clear and proud on its sleeve. Anyone familiar with the two Squaresoft SNES-era classics *Chrono Trigger* (now on PC) and *Super Mario RPG* (being remade for Switch) will feel immediately at home, with elements of both clearly apparent.

From the look of the overworld (with its adorable shrunk-down character sprites) to the flow of its dungeons, with real-time exploration segueing seamlessly into turn-based combat, it's an immediate hit of nostalgia. Like my childhood memories of *Chrono Trigger*, but more, with exceptionally detailed environment art, smoother animated sprites and some very fetching lighting effects. Miko had a few things to say about the process of designing those environments, and how much time and effort it took. "I'm the main level artist on this project. It's hard to say how long it takes to make one of these environments, but we had really good tools to work with so it was kind of a breeze, actually."

"There's very little friction, producing the assets. It's still all on a grid, and the one thing we're always shooting for is that it should still feel retro. It should live emotionally in a place where you're like, 'Oh yeah, that's what the Super NES could have been,' even though almost everything is illegal. None of this would ever run on a real SNES," says Thierry.

While *Chrono Trigger* is the aesthetic core, the combat feels closer to *Mario RPG*, with hard-hitting attacks and timed inputs allowing players to boost or deflect damage by tapping the interact button at the exact right time. Timed hits sound like a small feature on paper, but in practice it completely changes the feel of the combat. Unless you deflect hits regularly, enemy attacks can do surprisingly high damage, and your own damage output is going to be kneecapped unless you're paying attention.

Every attack – enemy or allied – has its own timing to memorise, and some have interesting interactions, like a bouncing projectile that can hit many, many times if you manage to tap with every increasingly fast impact. Combined with the *Chrono*



EVERY ATTACK – ENEMY OR ALLIED – HAS ITS OWN TIMING TO MEMORISE



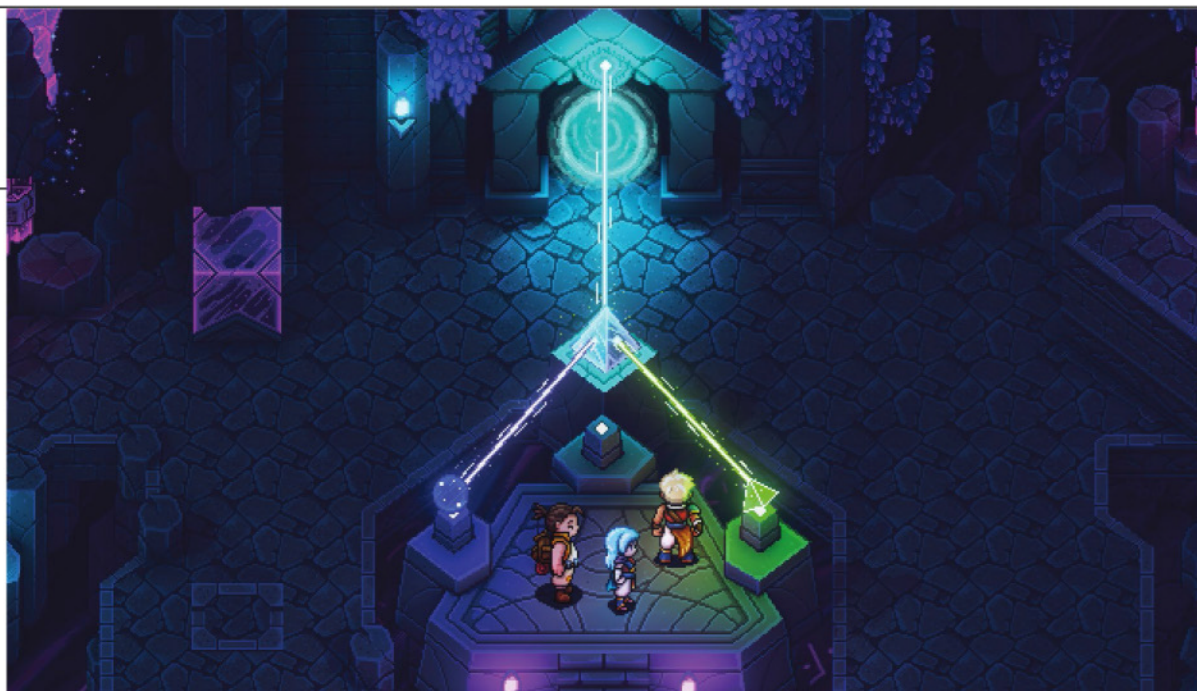
Part of the harbour town, Brisk, seen in the demo but with the camera much closer to the heroes.

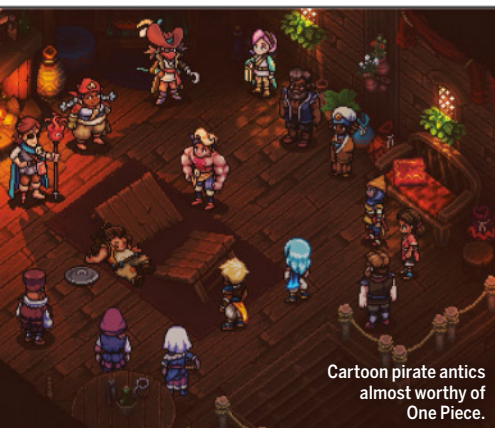
PREVIEW

Sea of Stars

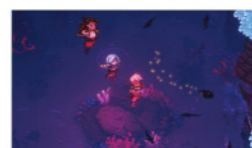
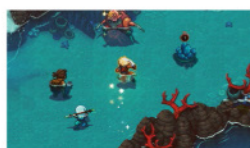
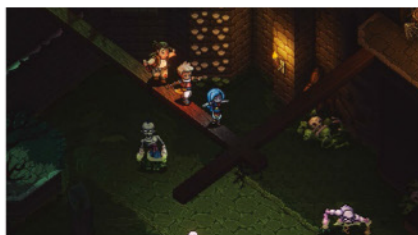
RIGHT: The demo dungeon's gimmick is refracted light – a setup for a painful pun.

BELOW: The overworld evokes dangerous levels of *Chrono Trigger* nostalgia.





Cartoon pirate antics almost worthy of *One Piece*.



Trigger-esque layout of combat, it's an instantly familiar blend if you're familiar with the inspirations, but easy to learn even if you're not.

One other element tying *Sea of Stars* to *Chrono Trigger* is the music. While much of it feels like a heartfelt tribute to *Chrono Trigger*'s soundtrack, Sabotage commissioned *CT*'s original composer, Yasunori Mitsuda, to compose eight guest tracks, two of them with extra night-time variants. While not featured in the demo, Sabotage claims that Mitsuda's songs fit in almost seamlessly.

FARCICAL FANTASY

Curiously, *Sea of Stars* is also a prequel of sorts to *The Messenger*. While both games are intended to be fully enjoyable as standalone adventures, *The Messenger* is technically set in the far post-apocalyptic future of its world. Not to spoil too much for those who haven't played it yet, but a late-game area has you discovering a shrine to gods of the sun and moon, hinting at a great flood that put most of the world underwater. Considering that *Sea of Stars*' leads have sun and moon-themed powers provides the hook, but existing in such close proximity to *The Messenger* seems to have caused some of its silliness to rub off.

Despite *Sea of Stars*' villain being the ominously named Fleshmancer, it is far from self-serious. The incidental jokes come thick and fast in the demo, as the heroes are trying to recruit the aid of a pack of cartoon pirates led by the absurdly named Captain Klee'shaë. Among her crew, a seeming-scrawny deckhand with enormous hidden muscles kept in check by a magic shirt, and a pirate wizard wearing twice the normal allotment of eyepatches, both of which he lifts to see what he's doing. The demo also caps off with a fight against a magical ghost plagued by colour-fringing artefacts; the groan-worthily named Chromatic Apparition. I grudgingly approve.

While not quite as overtly wacky as *The Messenger*, the tone established here seems bright and breezy. The demo contains a few moments where upcoming plot points are [REDACTED FOR SPOILERS], and the developer talks

directly to the player about content cordoned off. It feels like a dialogue between old fans of the genre and newcomers that may not have played the classics. I pressed Thierry on how he balanced the drama of a high-fantasy adventure with the studio's obvious love for tongue-in-cheek writing, "I'm still just one writer handling every single word, so it comes from the same kind of space. This is just what just happens when I try to tell an epic story; I feel I'm getting kind of cringy, and then I pick on myself and the dialogue a bit. I'm trying to find a balance and remember that it's all just to have fun in the end. I'd say there's a bit more of a serious tone this time round and not really any fourth wall breaking. Overall, it's much more about itself."

LESS IS MORE

With *Chrono Trigger* and *Mario RPG* being such obvious inspirations, I asked Thierry just how big an adventure players were looking at here. While hesitant to divulge specifics, he was happy to say that *Sea of Stars* is unlikely to take over all your free time, and it's also not going to make you retread old ground, even if it meant more effort to develop.

Thierry explains, "One big inspiration we took from *Chrono Trigger* and *Mario RPG* is how every biome is unique. If you've played the demo, and gotten through the wizard's lab? There's not another one that re-uses all those assets. Those enemies? You'll never see them again in a different colour. That does mean a bit of a shorter game, but we much prefer that approach. The player is always moving on to a new thing."

Lastly, before letting Sabotage return to putting the finishing touches on the game, I asked Thierry to recommend a JRPG that others might have missed. His answer: *Treasure of the Rudras*, another Squaresoft SNES RPG with a magic system that allows you to create new spells through combining words. While the game teaches you some, trial, error and improvisation work too.

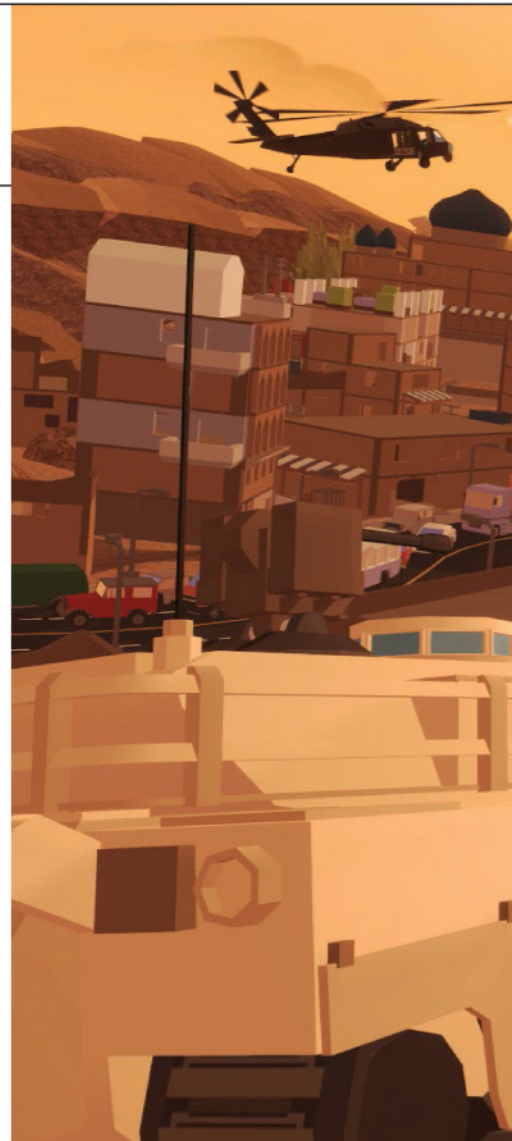
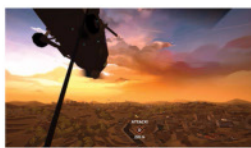
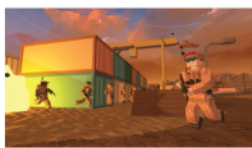
Treasure of the Rudras never officially left Japan, but an unofficial translation patch rolled out in 2015. Nigh impossible to play in any legitimate capacity, but I won't rat anyone out who finds a translated copy lurking around. We ain't cops. Or lawyers. Or your mum.

Sea of Stars launches August 29 on Steam and will be a day-one release on Microsoft's PC Game Pass.

Dominic Tarason

CURIOUSLY, SEA OF STARS IS ALSO A PREQUEL OF SORTS TO THE MESSENGER

BattleBit Remastered



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE

June 15, 2023 (Early Access)

DEVELOPER

Vilaskis, TheLiquidHorse

PUBLISHER

SgtOkiDoki

LINK

shorturl.at/bfklr

BATTLEBIT REMASTERED

A microtransaction-free FPS that's taken Steam by storm

In a year that has repeatedly shown us the dark side of the free-to-play ecosystem, I can't think of a better time for *BattleBit Remastered* to appear on Steam and instantly steal the spotlight. And I can see why. This is an indie FPS that moves like *Battlefield*, behaves like hardcore milsim *Squad*, and looks like *Roblox*. Man, PC gaming is fun.

BattleBit is an interesting case, though, even compared to other Steam success stories. For one, *BattleBit* is doing battle in the most competitive genre in gaming. Usually when I hear about an indie game blowing up the charts, it's in a genre that isn't constantly overcrowded. It's a lot harder for an FPS to stand out when there's no shortage of fun, well-supported, free shooters. And yet here is *BattleBit*, charging £12.79 for admission and making more money on Steam than *Call of Duty*.

It seems silly to give a game special credit for being a good value, but the truth is *BattleBit* feels like a buffet because we've gotten accustomed to leaner, free-er shooters that start with a modest amount of stuff and build on it over time. It's weird to jump straight into a brand-new shooter that looks like it's already ten 'seasons' deep in 2023.

Not that free-to-play doesn't have its advantages – it's remarkable how many good games are available for anyone to install and enjoy these days for free. Accessibility gets us in the door, and then battle passes push us to put our money

where our mouse is. But the longer I've played games like *Warzone*, *Valorant*, or *Apex Legends*, the more their constant nagging about battle pass buy-ins and overpriced skin bundles has made me feel like a player second and a target first.

Multiplayer FPS fans with the same service-game malaise may find *BattleBit* to be the perfect palate cleanser. It also helps that it's very fun. The blocky characters and low-detail environments do not prepare you for how well-tuned and balanced it is.

It's also surprisingly intense for a shooter lacking graphic violence or overwhelming audio, which you can mostly chalk up to the impromptu roleplay that robust proximity chat inspires – most of your teammates will talk to you when you talk to them, and if they're really getting into it, they'll yell for medics with genuine conviction or belt out a rousing speech before rushing into gunfire. It's the same environment of (usually) good-faith, impromptu participation that makes *Squad* and *Foxhole* often more social games than competitive.

PUNCHES ABOVE

BattleBit has echoes of what Eric Barone did with *Stardew Valley*: a small game that punches above its weight and wins people over with unexpected depth and quality. Like *Stardew*, *BattleBit*'s prior anonymity worked in its favour. Having zero expectations for a thing makes us kinder about what it does well and forgiving of what it sucks at, like how I've yet to mention that *BattleBit*'s guns sound like you're shooting globs of wet sand, or how hit registration isn't as consistent as *Battlefield* or *Warzone*, or how some buildings that look like they should be destructible aren't. Hey, it's early access. That's more than you can say for some bigger games that launch without features you'd usually expect.

And unlike free-to-play games whose perceived health are in constant flux with their latest updates, I'm not really worried about *BattleBit*'s future. If developer OkiGames delivers all of the maps, guns and modes it's planning to have in free updates, that's great, but even if it doesn't, I've certainly had my fill of fun.

Morgan Park

PLAYED IT



Get to the chopper!

SURPRISINGLY INTENSE FOR A SHOOTER LACKING GRAPHIC VIOLENCE



ABOVE: *BattleBit* moves like a *Battlefield* game but looks like *Roblox*.

LEFT: Many buildings are destructible, adding tactical opportunities.



ILLUMINATE YOUR SETUP

Customise your next Gaming PC in all-white with PCSpecialist's new Luna Series configurator, combining unparalleled performance with unmatched aesthetics.



WWW.PCSPECIALIST.CO.UK

Get an exclusive **£15 DISCOUNT**
with PCGamer using code **PGA23**

Luna iCUE



- ▶ AMD Ryzen 9 7900X
- ▶ Windows 11 Home
- ▶ ASUS® PRIME X670-P-CSM
- ▶ 32GB Corsair VENGEANCE RGB 5600MHz RAM
- ▶ 16GB GIGABYTE GEFORCE RTX 4080
- ▶ 2TB SAMSUNG 980 PRO M.2

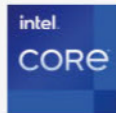
Now:

£2,999* (While stocks last)

SAVE: £137



Luna Elite



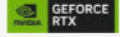
- ▶ Intel® Core™ i5-13500
- ▶ Windows 11 Home
- ▶ ASUS® PRIME Z790-P
- ▶ 32GB Corsair VENGEANCE RGB 5200MHz RAM
- ▶ 8GB ZOTAC GEFORCE RTX 4060
- ▶ 1TB SOLIDIGM P41+ M.2

Configure from:

£1,260*



Luna Pro



- ▶ AMD Ryzen 9 7900X3D
- ▶ Windows 11 Home
- ▶ ASUS® ROG STRIX X670E-A GAMING WIFI
- ▶ 64GB Corsair DOMINATOR RGB 5600MHz RAM
- ▶ 12GB GEFORCE RTX 4070 TI
- ▶ 2TB SOLIDIGM P41+ M.2

Configure from:

£2,800*



CONFIGURE YOUR LUNA SERIES BUILD TODAY

WWW.PCSPECIALIST.CO.UK

      **PCSpecialist**

*Prices are including VAT and are correct at time of printing, but subject to change. Images are for illustration purposes only, components may differ in aesthetics and brand.





p40

**STARFIELD &
CONSTELLATION**



p42

**CHARACTERS
& SKILLS**



p44

**SPACESHIPS
& EXPLORATION**



p46

**COMBAT
& BEYOND**

STAR GAZER

STARFIELD is Bethesda's biggest ever game and, right here, PC Gamer explores the vast scope of the cosmic new CRPG

By Robert Jones

It's sure been a long time coming but *Starfield* is finally here. Following in the footsteps of Bethesda's previous expansive CRPGs in both *The Elder Scrolls* and *Fallout* series, *Starfield* is a game that has taken the best part of a decade to make but, unlike adventures like *Skyrim*, *Starfield* sees the developer enter a completely new world.

Or, maybe, worlds would be a more apt description, as unlike Bethesda's previous CRPGs, *Starfield* isn't just set on one world, but across more than a thousand different ones. Worlds that, as a new member of the Constellation space exploration organisation, it is your job to travel to in your own spaceship, discover, explore and adventure in.

Yes, *Starfield* sounds truly out of this world. Here, PC Gamer breaks down its astonishing scope.



STARFIELD & CONSTELLATION

All systems are go

Starfield was officially announced by Bethesda back in 2018, with it being the game studio's follow-up project to online CRPG, *Fallout 76*. As a triple-A singleplayer role-playing game, though, the game would be the successor to 2015's *Fallout 4*, meaning that today in 2023 *Starfield* has been in the works, in some form, for over eight years.

That's a long wait. Not *Duke Nukem Forever* long, sure, but when you're going on half a generation in terms of elapsed time, you're talking about an incredibly large project. And that complexity and scale of the *Starfield* project is absolutely evidenced by what we now know it offers gamers. Not just an open world to explore, but an open universe.

OK, universe may be pushing its scope a tad, but with *Starfield* set in a vast area of space referred to as The Settled Systems (an area that stretches from our solar system out for approximately 50 lightyears), an area that in the game is filled with over a thousand planets, with each one visitable by the player and all filled with some mix of resources, creatures, settlements, outposts, quests and, most importantly, adventure, the scale of the in-game environment Bethesda has created in *Starfield* cannot be underestimated.

WELCOME TO CONSTELLATION

And you'll be exploring that vast in-game environment as a member of the space exploration organisation, Constellation. This organisation was once legendary for its feats of cosmic adventuring but now, in 2330, Constellation is very much a shadow of its former glory.

Despite many members of the public not even realising that Constellation is still operational in 2330, it's based at the capital of the United Colonies, New Atlantis on the planet of Jemison in the Alpha Centauri system. The organisation remains committed to its goal of discovering what is out there in the cosmos. Enter you, the player, who slips into the shoes of the Spacefarer in *Starfield*, a character you create yourself and who enters the story by coming into contact with an exotic, alien-looking artefact while working for an interstellar mining corporation called Argos Extractors.

After being connected with Constellation and taking the artefact back to the group, who themselves have also found similar treasures, it is revealed that the artefacts seem to work together and that more are needed to complete whatever it is they do. This is the catalyst for you, as the Spacefarer, to go exploring space with Constellation in search of the remaining alien heirlooms.



Each planet has its own dynamic atmosphere.



WHAT IS CONSTELLATION?

The organisation committed to unlocking the mysteries of space



- 1 Constellation's HQ is located in the United Colonies' capital city, New Atlantis.
- 2 The leader of Constellation is a former soldier and explorer, Sarah Morgan.
- 3 Vasco is Constellation's expeditionary robot, and can accompany you on missions.
- 4 Constellation's logo features eight stars. Could this be a nod to eight artefacts?





Prepare to explore
over 1,000 planets.



**STARFIELD IS SET IN A
VAST AREA OF KNOWN
SPACE REFERRED TO AS
THE SETTLED SYSTEMS**



**STARFIELD'S NEW
CHARACTER CREATOR IS
THE BIGGEST AND MOST
OPTION-FILLED EVER**



Even deep-space explorers need a daily cup of joe.



Sarah Morgan is the leader of Constellation.

CHARACTERS & SKILLS

Role-playing an explorer

Before the player can go off exploring The Settled Systems and beyond, though, in true Bethesda CRPG-style they need to create the character they are going to play as. Enter *Starfield*'s character creator, which Bethesda has confirmed is its biggest and most option-filled ever.

Character creation is broken down into the physical construction of the character, as well as that character's background and specific traits. In terms of physical appearance, players can modify their body type, with a chart allowing a combination of muscular, thin and heavy appearance, as well as their walking style. Naturally, skin tone can also be dictated as desired.

Zooming in to facial detail, gamers start by selecting from 40 presets, before then being allowed to fully customise their character's face, tweaking options such as nose, ears, eyes, cheeks, mouth, chin, neck, head shape, hair, facial hair, scars, piercings and even teeth, among others. Hair and eye colour can also be altered.

PLAYING A ROLE

Once the Spacefarer's appearance has been determined by the gamer, *Starfield* then lets the player role play that character as they see fit, selecting for them a background that imparts three basic skills when selected, as well as – if desired –

some traits that modify how the game plays in small ways.

For example, if the gamer chooses the background of Explorer, then their Spacefarer is granted the skills of lasers, astrodynamics and surveying out of the gate. These skills mean the player is more expert in laser weapons, modifying or upgrading their spaceship's hardware, and recording and deciphering data harvested on alien worlds. These skills lean into the explorer character.

Meanwhile, if the diplomat background is chosen, then the Spacefarer is more expert in the skills of persuasion, commerce and wellness, things that improve their ability to get by in the world with conversation, as well as their overall fitness. There are many more of these, too, such as a cyberneticist.

Where things get even more interesting from a role playing perspective, though, is in traits. Up to three traits can be selected by the gamer during character creation, and these change the game in small but interesting ways. For example, if the gamer chooses the trait 'Kid Stuff', then in the game they get the option to visit their parents, who are alive and well, but have to send them two percent of their money each week. While if you select the 'Introvert' trait, then you consume less oxygen when adventuring alone, but more with companions.

BUILDING A STARFIELD CHARACTER

Get a taste for the game's character creation and role-playing systems



Body

Characters can be any combination of tall, short, fat, thin, muscular or skinny as desired.



Face

Every aspect of the face can be modified, right down to teeth, and scars, and the jewellery they wear.



Background

Selecting a background helps you define your character and provides them with three skills.



Traits

Up to three can be selected, with traits subtly altering how *Starfield* plays in interesting ways.

SPACESHIPS & EXPLORATION

Fire up the engines

There are plenty of characters in *Starfield*, including the one that the gamer creates and plays as themselves, but arguably one of the most important characters in the game is the Spacefarer's own spaceship, which the player can first buy and then customise as they see fit. After all, the Spacefarer is going to struggle visiting over a thousand planets and journey deep into space in search of artefacts without a spaceship.

And, if *Starfield*'s character creator is deep, then its spaceship builder is even more so, allowing the player to not just buy and own a fleet of ships, but also to customise them, both inside and outside, just as they see fit. These changes are not just cosmetic, either, genuinely adding extra performance, capabilities or features to the vessel.

Indeed, gamers can customise their vessel's engines, habitation module, weapons, cockpit, cargo hold, reactor, landing gear, bay, grav drive, fuel tanks, docker, shield generator and even cowlings. And upgrading these components will improve ship performance. Buy better engines and your ship will go faster, while an improved shield generator means better shields in combat. A bigger habitation module, meanwhile, will allow you to have a bigger crew on the spaceship.

Spaceships can be designed in a very fluid way, too, with basically any style permitted. As such, it is easy to see Spacefarers with hangars full of multiple spaceships that specialise in different activities, from agile fighters to large cargo transport vehicles. Each ship can also be painted from a myriad of different colours, adding big levels of visual personalisation.

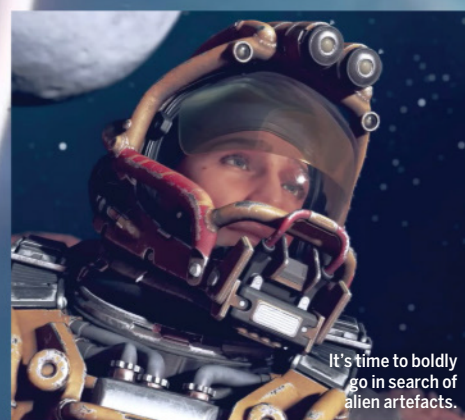
TO BOLDLY GO

And once in their spaceship *Starfield* players then have the ability to, well, go almost anywhere they want in it. The Settled Systems and beyond are theirs to explore as they wish, and to adventure in as they see fit. This being a Bethesda CRPG, there is obviously an absolute myriad of quests and missions to undertake, but it seems like there's going to be plenty of scope to just live within the *Starfield* in-game world, with activities like mining resources, scanning and cataloguing planets and their wildlife, transporting cargo, buying and selling spaceships, hijacking spaceships as a pirate, dating NPCs, creating outposts and much more besides.

Exploration and role playing the character you create seems more important than ever before in *Starfield*, and while the core mission and story of Constellation will no doubt provide plenty of excitement, it's hard not to look past these more living RPG sandbox elements as a key part of what *Starfield* offers gamers. ➤



You can design and spec ships as desired.



It's time to boldly go in search of alien artefacts.

LOCATION SCOUT

Starfield is stuffed with destinations, both civilised and wild, including...



Akila City
Cheyenne System, Freestar Space
The capital city of the Freestar Collective, a libertarian alliance.



Neon
Volii System, Freestar Space
Originally a huge fishing platform, Neon is now a trading centre.



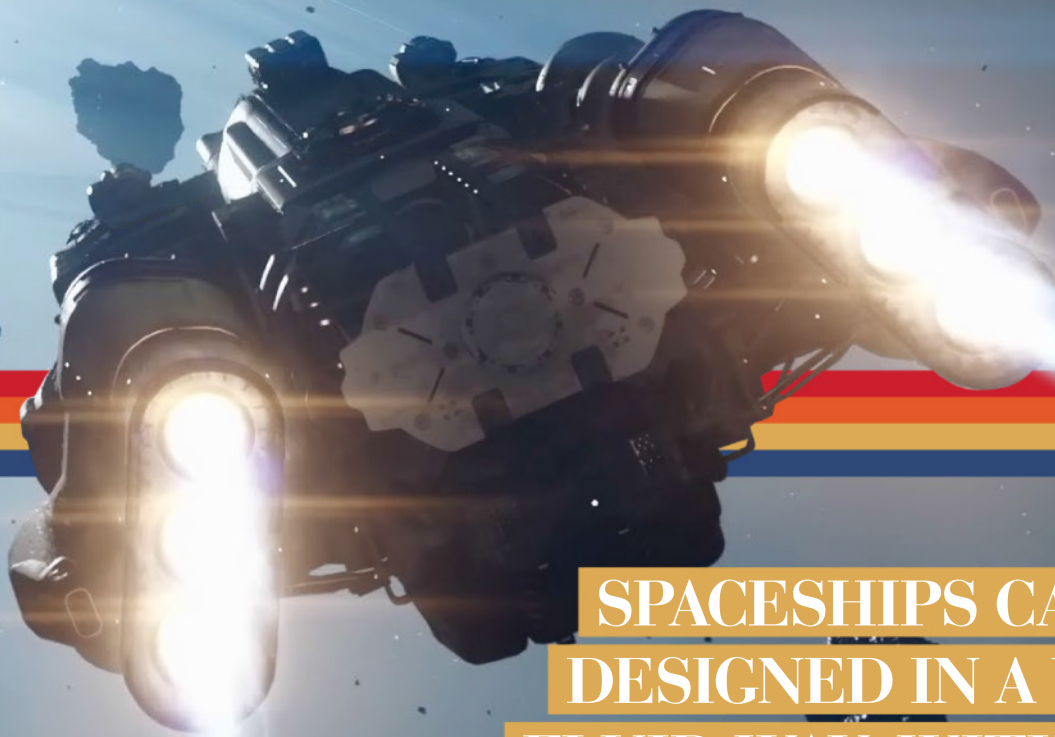
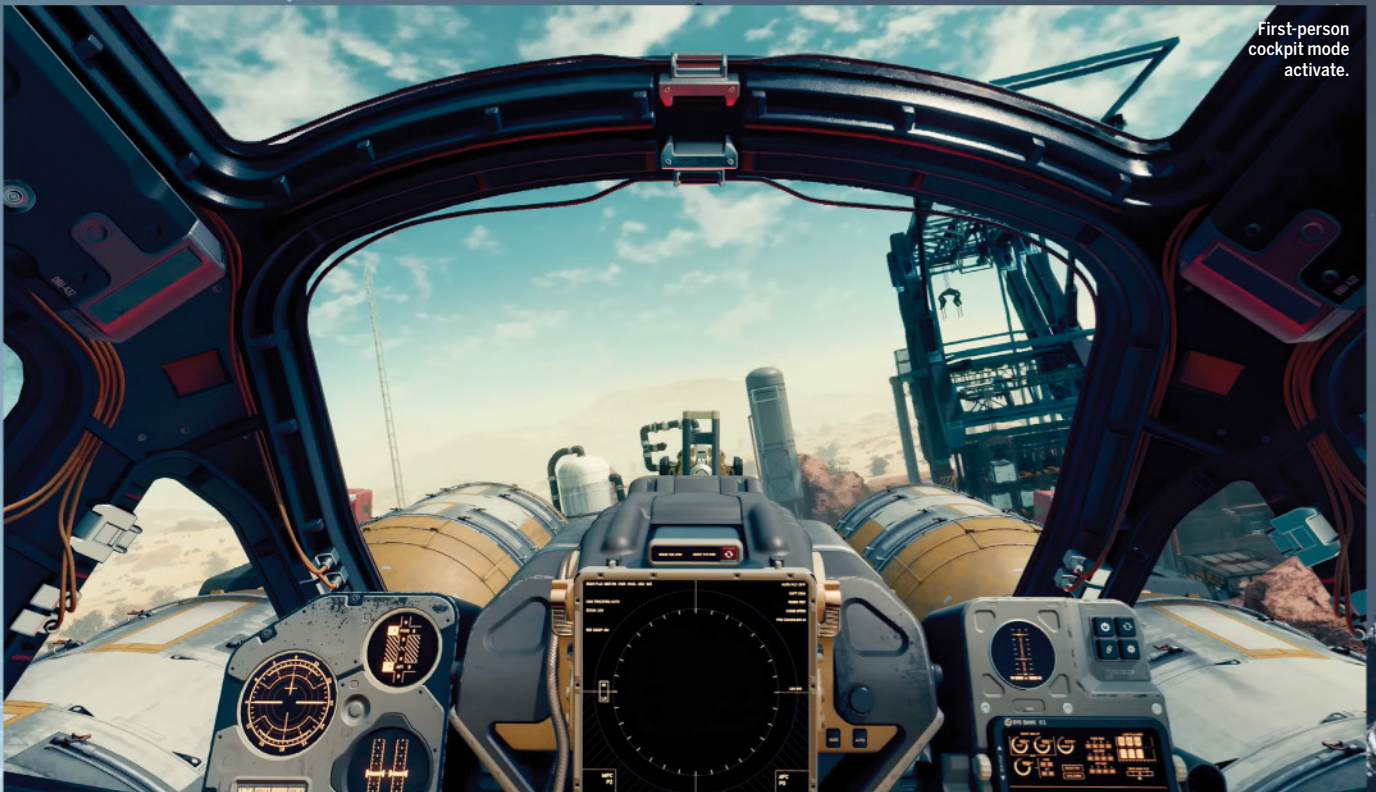
Red Mile
Porrima System, Porrima 3
A major facility located on the planet Porrima 3.



The Key
Crimson Fleet HQ, Kyrx System
The HQ of The Crimson Fleet, a faction in *Starfield*.



First-person
cockpit mode
activate.



SPACESHIPS CAN BE
DESIGNED IN A VERY
FLUID WAY, WITH ANY
STYLE PERMITTED



**IN ZERO-G, FIRING
TRADITIONAL BALLISTIC
WEAPONS WILL PUSH
YOU BACKWARDS**



COMBAT & BEYOND

Time to lock 'n load

This wouldn't be a Bethesda RPG, though, without combat. And, without doubt, deep space exploration in *Starfield* poses many risks and hostile encounters. From antagonistic factions defending their territories, to space pirates simply looking to ambush the unwary and harvest their spaceship and valuables, the Spacefarer is going to need some serious hardware to defend themselves and their crew.

This starts with the weapons their spaceship is equipped with, which helps when dogfighting other vessels in space, but when planetside or boarding another ship the Spacefarer will need to use a combination of weapons, such as traditional ballistic, laser, melee and more, as well as combat tools and skills to survive and prosper. Crucially, though, there are always multiple ways to fight, meaning combat can be approached in the manner the player desires.

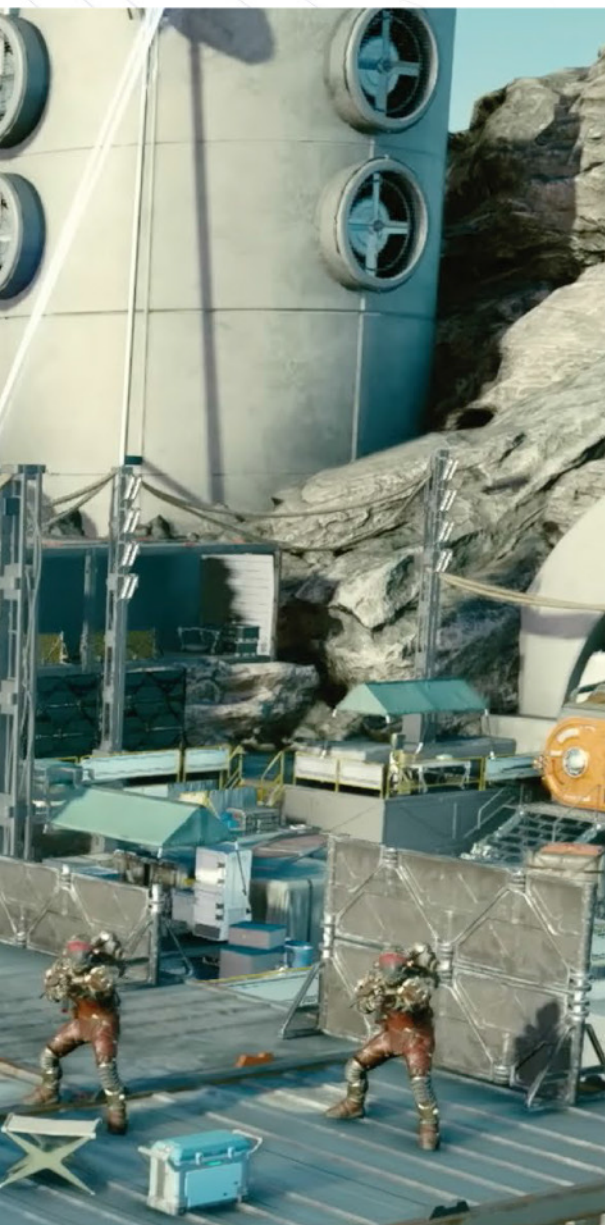
CUSTOM HARDWARE

For example, if you choose the Boost Pack Training skill, then you can use a jet pack to get the drop on your enemies in combat, jetting up into the air or to high ground, while if you choose the Neurostrikes skill then you can become an unarmed master, brutally punching your way through foes. Or, if you choose skills that

enhance your stealth abilities, then it's easier to sneak up on foes for easy assassinations or ambushes.

Not only is there a massive amount of weaponry in *Starfield*, and the ability to engage in combat how you want to, but Bethesda has created a deep weapon modification system for the game, too. This allows the Spacefarer to customise their weapons as they want. A rifle, for example, can have its receiver, internal firing mechanism, optics, grips, magazine, battery and muzzle modified, while the ammunition the rifle fires can also be upgraded, installing say adhesive or tetrafluoride rounds over traditional lead. Many weapons can also have a suppressor added for more stealthy shooting.

What's interesting, though, is that switching up weaponry and combat tactics depending on what you're doing and where you're fighting is really important in *Starfield*, and notably more so than past Bethesda RPGs. For example, in zero-G environments then firing traditional ballistic weapons is actually going to push you, the firer, backwards, while planets with, say, a low-G environment are going to increase the potential for prolonged boost-packing. And then there's the wide range of potential foes, from human, to robotic, to planetary fauna. Due to the scope of *Starfield*, fighting appears more immersive and complex than ever before. ■



Besieged by space pirates? Time to get explodey.

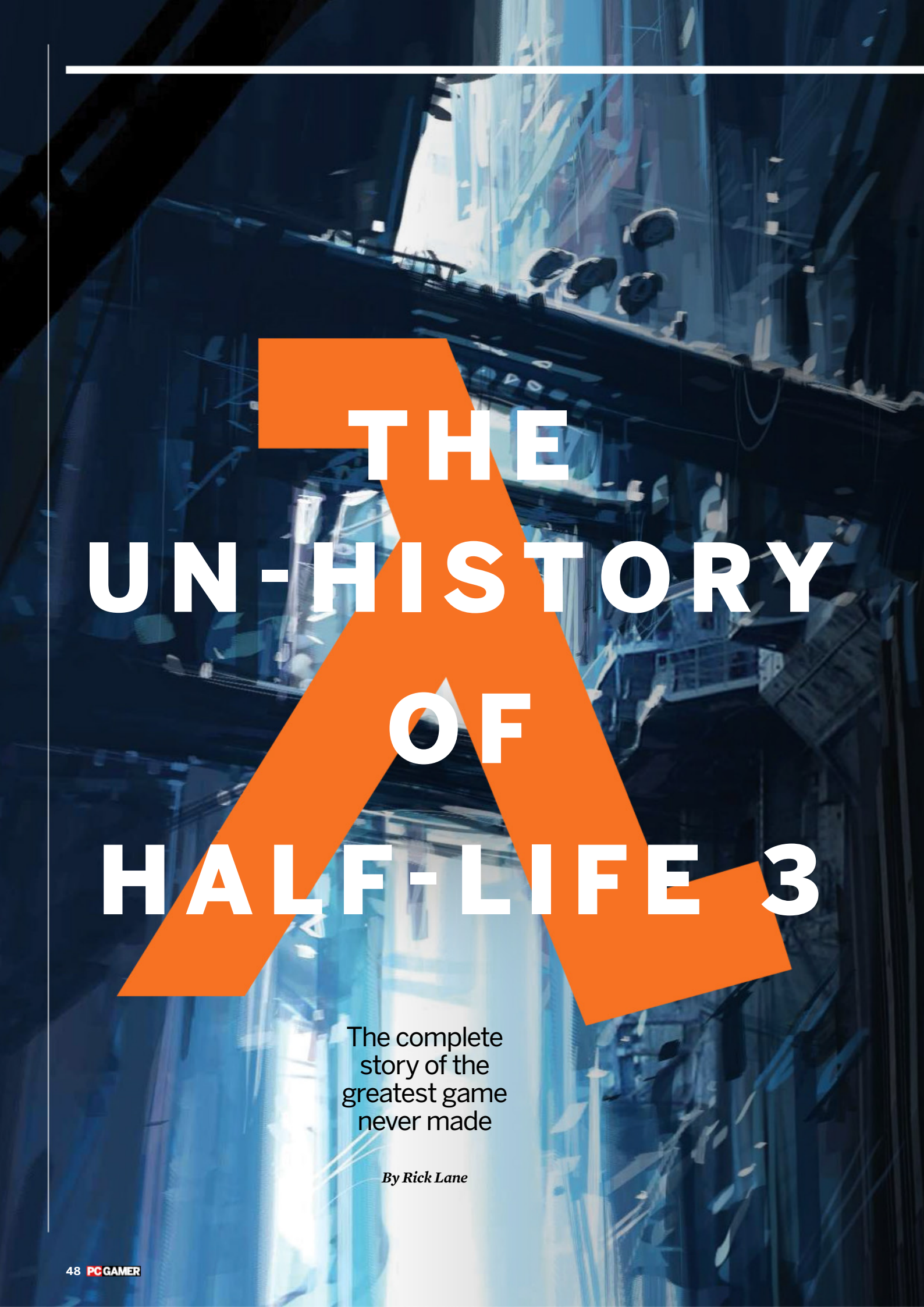


SPACE MAGIC

Starfield has teased some pretty out-there powers for the Spacefarer



As the Spacefarer is attacked by multiple enemies, they hold out their hand and then, suddenly as if by magic, gravity is removed, with foes also incapacitated, either being rendered unconscious or killed. This seemingly points towards *Starfield* having similar mechanics to the magical dragon shouts of *Skyrim*, allowing players to cast spells when desired. Could these powers be bestowed by artefacts? Right now nothing has been confirmed, but here at PC Gamer we think these powers being granted by artefacts (or being connected with them) makes sense.



THE UN-HISTORY OF HALF-LIFE 3

The complete
story of the
greatest game
never made

By Rick Lane

“SELL YOUR GRANDMOTHER, REMORTGAGE THE CAT, DO WHATEVER YOU HAVE TO DO. JUST DON’T MISS OUT.” SO READS THE FINAL LINE OF PC GAMER’S REVIEW OF HALF-LIFE 2.

ALMOST TWO DECADES SINCE ITS RELEASE, THE GENIUS OF VALVE’S SEQUEL HAS BEEN EXHAUSTIVELY DISCUSSED. BUT THE EXPLOSIVE IMPACT OF ITS DESIGN IS PRESERVED IN THE BREATHLESS WORDS OF ITS REVIEWS.

JIM ROSSIGNOL GAVE IT A SCORE OF **96** IN PC GAMER, CALLING IT **“A NEAR PERFECT SEQUEL”**.

THE LONG-DEFUNCT PCZONE WENT ONE POINT HIGHER, AND SAID **“GAMES MAY NEVER BE THIS GOOD AGAIN”**.

IGN MATCHED ZONE’S SCORE ON A DECIMAL SCALE, AWARDING IT **9.7**.

EUROGAMER BROUGHT OUT THE PERFECT **10**.

MOST REMARKABLY OF ALL, SO DID EDGE, MAKING HALF-LIFE 2 ONLY THE FIFTH GAME TO RECEIVE THE AWARD, ONE OF JUST 24 **“REVOLUTIONARY”** GAMES RATED SO TO DATE.

The Un-history of *Half-Life 3*

» *Half-Life 2* was a phenomenon, a game so good one of the few complaints levelled against it was that it didn't go on forever. "I want to bemoan the fact that it had to end at all," Rossignol wrote. As time regrettably stopped for Gordon atop City 17's Citadel, the question on everyone's lips was, "What's next?" Surely Valve wouldn't leave Alyx stranded beside an exploding portal. Surely Gordon wouldn't remain trapped in the G-Man's limbo. Valve had followed-up the most celebrated shooter of its day with something even better. Surely it would do it again.

Valve's answer was unexpected, and has only grown stranger as the years turned to decades. Two expansions, a VR prequel, a host of aborted spinoffs, and a rumour-mill so productive that it became a running joke. But never the one thing Valve fans have craved more than anything else, that trio of magical words, *Half-Life 3*.

Valve's evasion of its most famous series baffled players for years. But it isn't 2010 anymore, where the only clues to *Half-Life 3*'s whereabouts were a few cryptic allusions from Gabe Newell and a few cruelly staged internet hoaxes. There are answers to be had. Dig through the interviews, the news stories, the rumours and the leaks that have stemmed from and revolved around Valve for the last 20 years, and it's possible to build a surprisingly complete picture of *Half-Life*'s history during its long absence. We can confidently answer the two most important questions – what happened to *Half-Life 3*? And why didn't Valve make it?

POINT INSERTION

Perhaps the greatest irony of the whole *Half-Life 3* saga is that Valve may never have intended to make a third *Half-Life* game at all. At least, not in the conventional sense. This notion was being suggested by Valve before *Half-Life 2* had released. Hidden in the corner of PCZone's review of *Half-Life 2* is a boxout titled 'What's next for Valve?', in which the mag presses Valve's former PR man Doug Lombardi about the idea of making *Half-Life* a trilogy. "I don't know where that rumour came from," Lombardi responds. "That's just one of those rumours, like you had with Star Wars. We honestly don't know how many of these things we're going to make."

Lombardi's statement was true, albeit misleading. In *The Final Hours of Half-Life 2*, Geoff Keighley explains Gabe Newell's vision for *Half-Life 2* prior to its release,

which stretches far beyond a mere trilogy. "*Half-Life 2* isn't just a game," Keighley wrote. "Newell sees *Half-Life 2* as an engine, a platform, or at best a whole industry unto itself. Going forward there will be engine licenses, hundreds of thousands of user modifications (mods), episodic content, sequels, add-ons and expansions." Certain elements of Newell's vision would come true (*Half-Life 2* isn't short of mods, for example). But the idea of an omnipresent *Half-Life* universe stands in stark contrast to the modern reality.

As for direct-follow ups, Keighley's passing mention of sequels implies that *Half-Life 3* was in the ether. But later in the article, it becomes clear that Valve has no immediate plans to build a straight sequel. Making *Half-Life 2* was a bruising experience for Valve. It took six years at a time when most games were turned around in

two or three (by comparison, the original *Call of Duty* was made in 18 months). Around two years of this was spent in crunch, where designers work long additional hours to get the game made. The project restarted halfway through, and the delay of the game from its scheduled release date of September 2003 put Newell under intense scrutiny from fans and the press. Worst of all, Valve had to contend with an unfinished version of the game being leaked online by a German hacker named Axel Gembe.

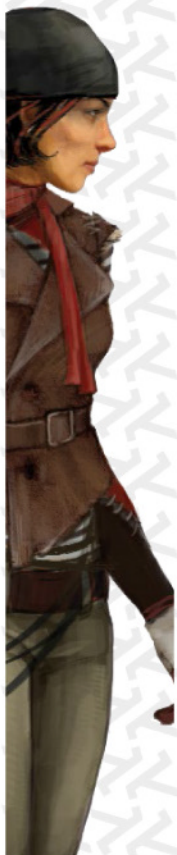
By the time *Half-Life 2* released, Valve's developers were exhausted, with Newell admitting at the time, "We absolutely have chewed people up on this project." Hence, the prospect of committing to another long development cycle was unimaginable: "We need to do smaller and shorter projects at first to avoid burnout."

DIRECT INTERVENTION

By this point, Newell was also considering how to leverage Valve's new digital distribution platform Steam, which could bypass the whole process of buying physical games from shops, and get them into the players' hands more directly. One idea was to use it to deliver games in shorter chunks, referred to as "episodes". It was an attempt to make games in a new way, quicker, with less of a human cost. Valve didn't want to make another *Half-Life 2*, a game that required it to reinvent everything again.

Moreover, the six years spent making *Half-Life 2* were not just spent building the game. They also involved

"NEWELL SEES HALF-LIFE 2 AS AN ENGINE, A PLATFORM, OR AT BEST A WHOLE INDUSTRY UNTO ITSELF"



Time, Doctor Freeman?

The *Half-Life* timeline



Half-Life 1998
Valve's original game was hugely influential on FPS level design and storytelling.



Half-Life 2 2004
Gamers hoped the sequel would be good. It surpassed every expectation.



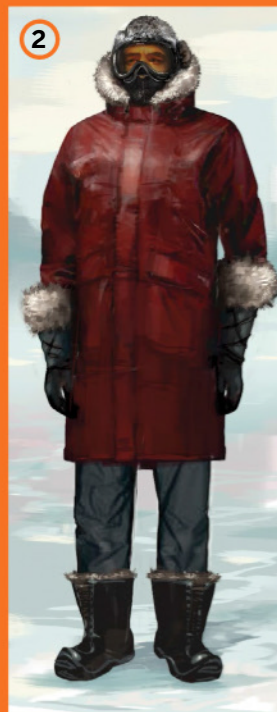
Half-Life 2: Episode 1 2006
While great, *Episode 1* was a bit underrated.



Half-Life 2: Episode 2 2007
The last *Half-Life* Valve would make for 13 years.



Half-Life 2: Episode Four 2005-2007
Junction Point's *HL2* ep was cancelled.



1 Concept art for *Episode 3* shows its alien Advisors playing a prominent role.

2 Whatever shape *Episode 3* may have taken, the polar theme appears consistent throughout.

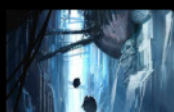
3 The star on the crashed chopper, along with the "225" serial number, imply it's the same vehicle seen at the end of *Episode 2*.



Ravenholm 2007-2009
Arkane got further than Junction Point, but not far enough.



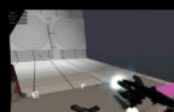
Half-Life 2: Episode 3 2007-c. 2011
Hung around for four years, then cancelled.



Half-Life 3 2013-2015
A procedural version of *Half-Life 3* was prototyped c. 2013.



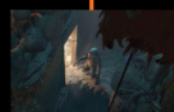
Alyx & Dog 2014
A VR game featuring Alyx Vance and Dog was supposedly experimented with.



Shooter 2014
A *Half-Life* minigame was meant to be included in the Lab.



Borealis 2015
Marc Laidlaw's VR project would've taken place on the elusive ghost ship.



Half-Life: Alyx 2020
Valve's VR prequel was brilliant, but it still left the story unfinished.

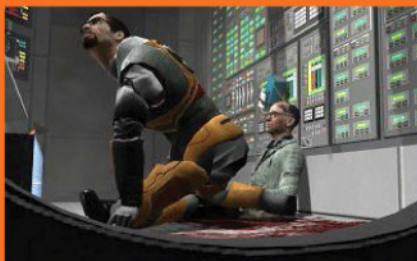


DIY Half-Life

The most notable mods that aim to 'finish' Gordon Freeman's adventure

Infinite Finality

Like *Project Borealis*, *Infinite Finality* is based on Laidlaw's *Epistle 3*, but this project was announced only this year, and shows plentiful evidence of active development. With regular news posts and even an official soundtrack. That said, the mod recently had to remove its project lead due to "a lot of confusion and setbacks", so while this is the most promising *Episode 3* project so far, I still wouldn't hold your breath.



The Closure

Released in 2016, *The Closure* picks up where *Half-Life 2* left off, with Gordon on the heels of Doctor Kleiner who has taken it upon himself to find the Borealis. While having the benefit of being one of the few unofficial *Episode 3* projects to actually release, *The Closure* doesn't quite capture *Half-Life*'s particular tone.



Project Borealis

The most ambitious *Episode 3* mod, *Project Borealis* aims to recreate Marc Laidlaw's *Epistle 3* short story in playable form. On the face of it, this appears to be a highly professional endeavour. The mod's website shows lush concept art and videos of in-development gameplay. However, the site hasn't been updated since 2020, so who knows if and when we'll see the final version.



making the engine, Source. “We’d just got comfortable with all our tools and what we could do,” said Valve designer Robin Walker in an interview with PC Gamer about *Half-Life 2*’s first expansion, then titled *Aftermath*. “That’s normally the point in which we’d go off and make new tools – we didn’t want to do that.” This was partly because Valve figured doing so would take even longer than it had with *Half-Life 2*, a point Newell explained in an interview with Eurogamer shortly after the launch of *Episode 1*. “The original *Half-Life* took us two years to develop. With a considerably larger team *Half-Life 2* took us six years to develop. So we thought if we were going to continue our trend with *Half-Life 3* we would basically ship after we had all retired.”

In the same interview, Newell confirms Valve viewed the *Half-Life 2* episodes as the equivalent of a third game. “Probably a better name for it would have been *Half-Life 3: Episode 1*,” because “these three [episodes] are what we’re doing as our way of taking the next step forward.” Newell doesn’t explain why they kept the *Half-Life 2* tagline, but he does elaborate on why they wanted to get more of the story out quickly, stating fans “didn’t want to have to wait as long as they had previously to find out what happened”.

In that sense, *Episode 1* was a success, launching 20 months after *Half-Life 2* in June 2006. This was later than Valve initially planned, as the development of *Half-Life 2: Lost Coast* and the *Day of Defeat: Source* “took some cycles”, but it was still a significant improvement over the six-year turnaround of *Half-Life 2*. The gap between *Episode 1* and *Episode 2* was even shorter, with the latter releasing just 16 months later in October 2007.

Valve’s plan seemed to be working. Not only had it released two well-received *Half-Life* episodes in half the time it took to make *Half-Life 2*, but it had also found time to make *Team Fortress 2*, one of the best multiplayer shooters, and *Portal*, a revolution in first-person gaming that was quietly *The Orange Box*’s MVP. *Episode 3* was supposed to follow hot on the heels of *The Orange Box*, scheduled for Christmas 2007.

ENTANGLEMENT

Christmas 2007 came and went. Then another Christmas came and went. Then another. And then another. Valve wasn’t completely silent on *Episode 3* during this time. Concept art for *Episode 3* was revealed in 2007, with more leaking online the following year. In 2009, a report surfaced stating that Valve was learning sign language to make a deaf character for *Episode 3*. The news became vaguer as time went on, with Newell speaking about “broadening the emotional palette” of *Half-Life* in 2010.

It isn’t clear when Valve formally cancelled *Episode 3*, but it was pretty much dead in the water by the time of *Portal 2*’s launch. The reasons behind its cancellation are clearer, albeit complex. By this point, Valve had started to encounter problems with the episodic model. It was supposed to take advantage of digital distribution, getting games into player’s hands faster and more directly.

Indeed, *Episode 1* was meant to be an entirely digital product. “If we were doing this without Steam we’d have to put [*Episode 1*] in a box, we’d have to start figuring out shelf space over a year beforehand,” Walker said to PC Gamer in 2005.

Yet *Episode 1* ended up releasing in a box anyway, because retail was still too big to ignore at the time. And retailers found the concept of episodic games confusing. “Our experience with *Episode 1* taught us that retailers had real difficulty selling a low priced box containing a new, high quality game,” Walker told me in 2017 for an article about the tenth anniversary of the *Orange Box*, published on Rock, Paper, Shotgun.

For *Episode 2*, Valve tried to solve this problem by bundling it with *Team Fortress 2* and *Portal*, essentially creating a premium game out of three smaller ones. But according to Walker, this confused retailers too, as multipacks were reserved for “bundles of old titles or bundles of low-quality ones”. Making the *Orange Box* was also an organisational nightmare compared to *Episode 1*. “The process itself had the pretty immediate effect of us saying, ‘Yeesh, let’s not try and do that again!’”

Meanwhile, Valve’s experience making *Team Fortress 2* had opened the company’s eyes to the advantages of a live-service model.

Speaking at Develop in 2011, Newell said, “With episodes, I think we accelerated the model and shortened development cycles with it. If you look at *Team Fortress 2*, that’s what we now think is the best model for what we’ve been doing. Our updates and release model keeps on getting shorter and shorter.”

Other factors played into *Episode 3* cancellation. With the spectre of *Half-Life 2*’s development fading, Valve had begun to build new tools in the form of Source 2. Moreover, as Walker explained to Kotaku in 2021, “*Half-Life*

has always been an IP where I think we were

interested in solving some interesting collision of technology and art that had revealed itself.” *Episode 1* innovated simply through its episodic nature, while *Episode 2* formed part of the unique experiment that was the *Orange Box*. With *Episode 3*, Walker claimed Valve couldn’t find the “wonderment, or opening” to make the episode an event like the previous two had been.

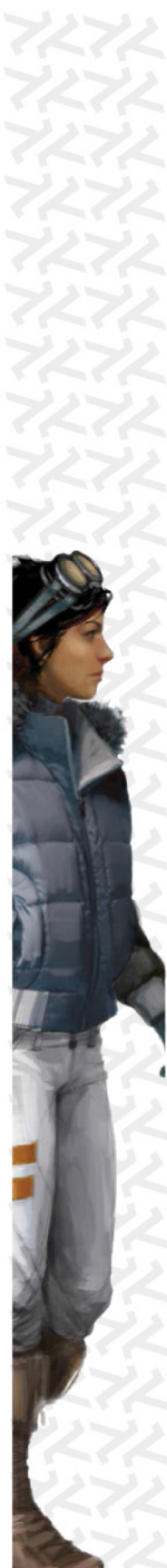
UNDER THE RADAR

Although *Episode 3* never released, we can assemble a rough picture of what it looked like. We know, for example, that it would have centred around the Borealis, the mysterious icebreaker first glimpsed in a video call with Judith Mossman during *Episode 1*.

The spectre of the Borealis has haunted *Half-Life* since development started on the second game. Originally named the Hyperborea in Marc Laidlaw’s first draft of the *Half-Life 2* script, the player arrived into City 17 on the icebreaker, not via train as seen in the final version. The Borealis was then shifted to form a later chapter of the game, sandwiched between two other cancelled chapters known as the Air Exchange and Kraken Base. All three

FOR
EPISODE 2,
VALVE TRIED TO
SOLVE THIS
PROBLEM BY
BUNDLING IT WITH
TEAM FORTRESS
2 AND PORTAL





chapters were cut from the final experience. Yet the idea of the Borealis lingered. As *Episode 2* concludes, Gordon and Alyx prepare to depart to the arctic to join Dr Mossman at the elusive vessel. The Borealis also forms the link between the universes of *Half-Life* and *Portal*. Built by Aperture Science, the dock where the ship was constructed can be explored in *Portal 2*. A nearby audio recording by Cave Johnson explains that Aperture was working on experimental *Portal* technology at the time.

Beyond this, the main evidence for the Borealis' significance in *Episode 3* is a piece of concept art from 2007. It shows a ship with the letters 'B...EALIS' visible on the side, trapped in a crevasse of ice with Combine gantries emerging from its hull, and a group of grub-like Advisor aliens flying through the frigid space. Later, leaked concept art shares the polar theme, depicting icy landscapes scattered with Combine architecture, rebels dressed in warm coats, and a portrait of Alyx.

Scattered amid the conceptual tundra are two more intriguing images. One depicts a silhouetted figure stood in a landscape of floating islands, much like those seen in the Xen chapter of the original *Half-Life*. Another, credited to former Valve artist Ted Backman, shows an Advisor host body with a human-like face, sprawled beside a bust of *Half-Life 2*'s chief antagonist, Doctor Breen. Known as the BreenGrub, the image shares its name with a dormant Twitter account run by Marc Laidlaw, which posted tweets in Breen's cod-philosophical rhetoric between 2012 and 2014.

The BreenGrub account writes extensively about the Shu'ulathoi, the Vortigaunt's words for Advisors. "I had access at one point to communications. To records. To proof." One tweet says, "There is a world. The home of the Shu'ulathoi. The Vortigaunts know its name but I do not." "I do not know if it is a world that can be found," hints another. Laidlaw revealed his presence behind the BreenGrub in 2013, tweeting, "@Breengrub is me having fun with some things that I love. It is not an ARG."

OUR MUTUAL FIEND

Laidlaw is also the source of the most detailed, and contentious, piece of evidence relating to *Episode 3*'s composition. In 2017, having departed Valve the year before, Laidlaw uploaded a short story to his website. Titled *Epistle 3*, it features gender-swapped characters with similar names to the *Half-Life 2* cast (such as Gertie Fremont and Alex Vaunt).

The ensuing story proceeds thus: Gertie and Alex crash-land their aircraft, venturing through a blizzard to the location of the Hyperborea, where they find it guarded by an ad-hoc fortress constructed by an alien force named the Disparate, who are researching the ship as it is "oscillating in and out of our reality". Before they can infiltrate the vessel, Gertie and Alex are detained by "minions of our former nemesis" Dr Wanda Bree, whose "back-up personality" has been imprinted "into a biological bank resembling an enormous slug" who pleads

with Gertie and Alex to end her life. Alex believes the Bree-Slug deserves her fate, but Gertie claims she "might have done something to hasten the slug's demise."

Not far from Bree's hiding place, Gertie and Alex discover Dr Jerry Maas, who provided the location of the Hyperborea, "held in a Disparate interrogation cell". They release Jerry and board the ship, which begins to oscillate between its current present and a previous point in time, specifically just before the Disparate launched its Nine Hour Armageddon invasion.

Jerry and Alex argue over what to do next. Alex wants to destroy the Hyperborea, while Jerry wants to save it for study. The argument turns into a fight, resulting in Alex shooting Dr Maas dead. Just before they destroy the Hyperborea "that sneering trickster" Mrs X appears. Mrs X absconds with Alex, leaving Gertie to her fate. But as the Hyperborea teleports into a Disparate Dyson sphere, Gertie is rescued by the Ghostlyhaunts who "parted their own checkered curtains of reality". Gertie concludes the letter with, "Expect no further correspondence from me regarding these matters; this is my final epistle."

The parallels between *Epistle 3* and the world of *Half-Life* are obvious. Nonetheless, the authenticity of *Epistle 3* as a plot summary of *Episode 3* is debatable. "My reaction to *Epistle Three* was largely, 'Oh, I've seen these kinds of things from Marc before,'" Robin Walker told Kotaku in March 2021. "There was never a document from Marc about, 'Here's the overall exact thing that needs to happen [in *Episode 3*].' Instead, there were many documents." Speaking to Rock, Paper, Shotgun this year, Laidlaw expressed regret for publishing *Epistle 3*, saying that he was "deranged" at the time, stating it "created the impression that if there had been an *Episode 3*, it would have been anything like my outline, whereas in fact all the real story development can only happen in the crucible of developing the game".

THE
BOREALIS ALSO
FORMS THE LINK
BETWEEN THE
UNIVERSES OF
HALF-LIFE AND
PORTAL

WE DON'T GO TO RAVENHOLM

Speaking to Eurogamer in 2006, Gabe Newell shared some thoughts about Valve's approach to expanding the *Half-Life* universe. Referring to Gearbox's work making expansions for *Half-Life*, he said, "I like the idea of expansion packs giving you a different perspective on things you've already lived through." When asked if he'd like to revisit the *HL2* timeline again he added, "We might do with expansion products because there's a lot of fun stuff there to explore."

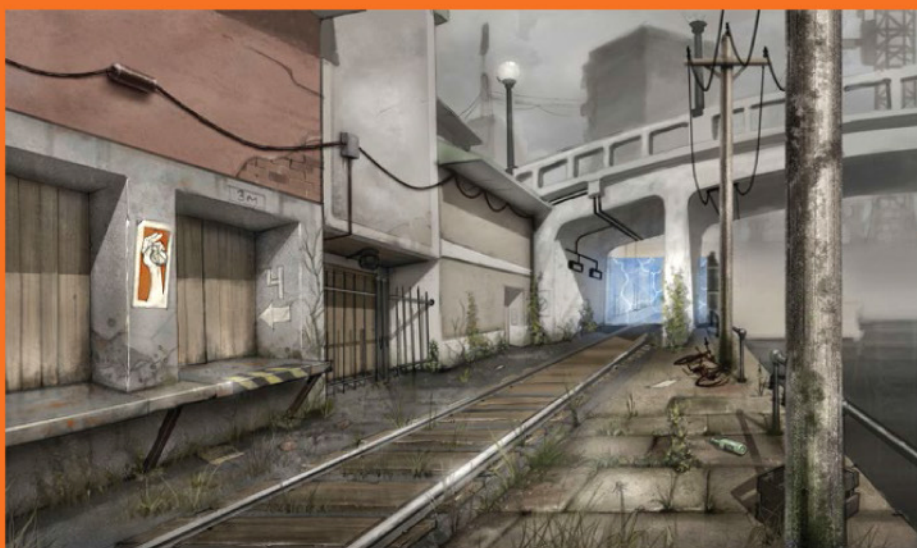
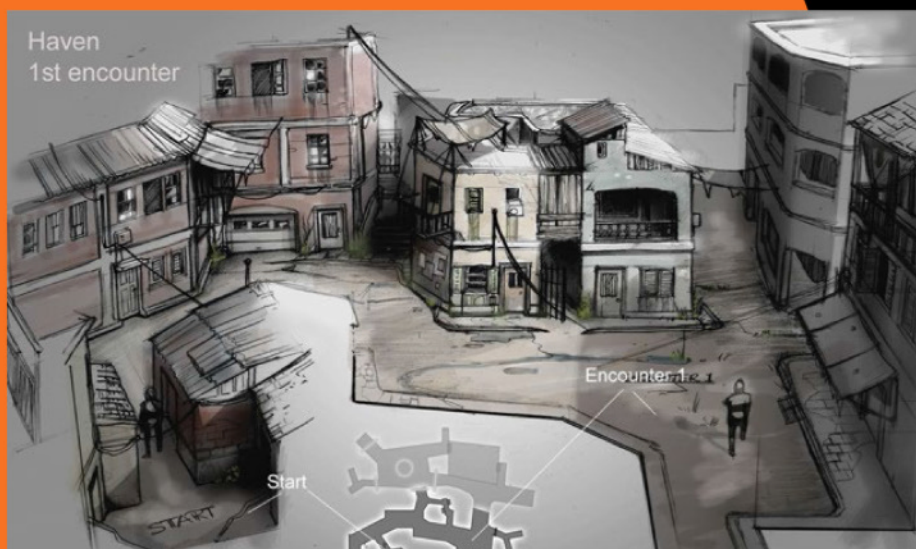
Newell was not speculating. At this point, work had already begun on a fourth *Half-Life* episode. It wasn't made by Valve, but by Junction Point Studios, a new developer founded from the ashes of Ion Storm Austin by *Deus Ex* director Warren Spector.

I spoke to Spector about the episode in 2017, and he revealed several key details. The episode was to be set in Ravenholm, and would have detailed the story of its fall. "We wanted to tell the story of how Ravenholm became what it was in the *Half-Life* universe," Spector recalled. "In addition to fleshing out the story of Ravenholm, we



The EA connection

An artist's concept art from an abandoned project surfaced



One of the biggest mysteries of *Half-Life*'s history relates to a series of concept art images posted by former EA Montreal artist Randy Humphries on his Coroflot profile, which were labelled "half life concept - cancelled project". The images include four images of City 17-like environments, such as a dilapidated railway track with a blue energy barrier in the background, and a pair of character concepts, including a Metrocop-like NPC wearing an orange armband with C17 written on it in black lettering. Yet beyond these few images, no further information on this project exists.



Canceled episodes

The Half-Life 2 developers riding shotgun with Valve



Arkane

Arkane's *Ravenholm* episode would have taken place in a children's hospital, with players fighting alongside a mutant Father Grigori.

Junction Point

Much less is known about Junction Point's episode. But it would have taken place in Ravenholm, explored Father Grigori's origins and featured a Magnet Gun.



☛ wanted to see more off Father Grigori and see how he came to be the character he later became in *Half-Life 2*.”

The episode would have also introduced a new weapon, the Magnet Gun, which would shoot out magnetic balls that would draw any nearby metal objects to their location. “You could fire it at a wall across an alley from a heavy metal dumpster and wham! The dumpster would fly across the alley and slam into the wall. You can imagine the effect on anything approaching you in the alley – either squashed or blocked.”

Junction Point worked on the episode for “a solid year” somewhere between the end of 2005 and mid-2007. During this time, the studio produced a “vertical slice” showing off the magnet gun, and a “small area that demonstrated how the game would look when we were done”. According to Spector, the project was ultimately cancelled by Valve, which was “frustrating” for Junction Point. “We had just started building what I thought was amazing stuff. And that’s when Valve pulled the plug.”

It isn’t clear why the episode was dropped, but it’s possible Valve was unsatisfied with what Junction Point was producing. Shortly after the cancellation, Valve hired Arkane Studios to build a very similar expansion, known simply as *Ravenholm*, and even sent over Junction Point’s Magnet Gun prototype as a starting point.

Arkane’s project progressed considerably farther than Junction Point’s, to the point where there is a playable alpha version kept within the studio. Designed as a standalone episode, it would have heralded the return of Adrian Shepherd, the protagonist of *Half-Life: Opposing Force*. Shepherd would team up with Father Grigori, who had created a serum to make him immune to headcrab bites, as the pair explored a “kind of experimentation centre” that was formerly a children’s hospital. *Ravenholm* would feature Junction Point’s Magnet Gun, alongside a nail gun used to create ad-hoc electrical circuits for solving puzzles. Grigori’s experiments would have seen him mutate as the game progressed, gradually turning into a monster.

Like Junction Point’s project, *Ravenholm* was cancelled, allegedly because Valve deemed it too expensive. In an email to the website Lambda Generation, Marc Laidlaw explained: “We felt like a lot of the staples of *Ravenholm* – headcrabs and zombies! – were pretty much played out.” Laidlaw added, “the fact it would have to take place sometime before the end of *Episode 2*” was a “creative constraint that would hamper the project”.

OUR BENEFACTORS

As the promise of *Episode 3* dwindled, the gaming community tried to fathom why Valve would leave the *Half-Life* story unfinished. The logical conclusion was Valve must be developing something bigger. It isn’t clear when the narrative shifted from focusing on *Episode 3* to *Half-Life 3*, but the idea was certainly in transition by the time two Canadian fans picketed Valve headquarters in August 2011, sitting on lawn chairs with cardboard signs

that read, “CANADA 4 THE RELEASE OF *HALF LIFE 3*,” and, “*HALF LIFE 3 IS IT LEFT 4 DEAD?*” Gabe Newell greeted the picketers, and they were even given a tour of Valve’s offices. Later, Newell spoke to Kotaku about the incident, saying, “They wanted to know when *Episode 3* was coming out.”

This wasn’t the only time fans demanded more information from Valve regarding *Half-Life*. In 2011, a Steam group called A Call for Communication (*Half-Life*) evolved from a forum petition first started in 2009, attracting 50,000 members as of February that year (the group remains active, celebrating its tenth birthday in 2021). In January 2012, a group of Steam users launched Operation Crowbar, purchasing crowbars on Amazon and mailing them to Valve as a form of protest.

These may appear like petty, entitled stunts, but at the same time Valve seemed unable to help teasing its community with hints and allusions to a new *Half-Life* game. In April, Newell was jokingly asked on a podcast “When can we expect the release of *Ricochet 2*?” to which he responded “We’d like to be super-transparent about the release of *Ricochet 2*. The problem is, we think that

the twists and turns that we’re going through would probably drive people more crazy than just being silent about it.” Two months later,

Newell appeared in a video forging a crowbar. Asked, “Hey, is that about ready?” He responded, “These things, they take time.” Then, in August, Newell appears in another video in which he jokes, “You’ll never get *Half-Life 3* if you eat me.”

Among these vague hints of *Half-Life 3* were outright fabrications. In 2012, an April Fools prankster posted an image on Steam of a faked *Half-Life 3* logo with the words “Now

Available” underneath, fooling several legitimate news publications. Speculation about *Half-Life 3* ramped up significantly in

2013, when Valve apparently filed a trademark

request in the EU for the name *Half-Life 3*. Fanning the flames was a leak from Valve’s bug-tracking database Jira that revealed the names of two development groups, one titled *Half-Life 3*, and another listed as *Half-Life 3* core. But the trademark was fake, while the validity of the Jira leak is impossible to confirm.

REVELATIONS

As the 2010s progressed, the hints and rumours became more accurate. In 2015, Valve programmer Jeep Barnett revealed the company was experimenting with *Half-Life* assets in virtual reality, but stopped short of confirming Valve was making a *Half-Life* VR game. “Would we like to make all our franchises in VR? Absolutely, but we don’t have enough time or people. So we have to figure out what’s the best fit, what plays to the strengths of VR.” Later that year, Valve released a VR app, which included a data string for something called *HLVR*.

Then, in November 2019, came the news that everybody, yet also nobody, was waiting for. Valve was making a new *Half-Life* game, and it was coming out soon. But it wasn’t *Half-Life 3*. Instead, it was *Half-Life*:

NEWELL
APPEARS IN
ANOTHER VIDEO
IN WHICH HE
JOKES, “YOU’LL
NEVER GET HALF-
LIFE 3 IF YOU
EAT ME”



The Un-history of *Half-Life 3*

➤ *Alyx*, a VR-exclusive prequel to *Half-Life 2* which put players in the shoes of a young Alyx Vance years before she meets Gordon Freeman. For those who could afford to play it, *Alyx* would prove worth the wait, offering all the imagination, excitement, and innovation expected from a *Half-Life* game. But its reveal, PR campaign, and post-mortems also provided fresh insight into what happened with *Half-Life 3*.

It turned out that *Half-Life 3* had existed, albeit briefly. Between 2013 and 2014, Valve had worked on a project referred to as *Half-Life 3* that blended procedurally generated encounters with more authored levels, thus creating a more replayable experience. The project lead, David Spreyer, recalled how the procedural systems would work in Geoff Keighley's interactive article *Half-Life Alyx: The Final Hours*. "The game would find a building, seal up all the windows so there was only one way in, put a citizen or prisoner somewhere in the building, and then populate the building with enemies." However, Spreyer says the prototype "didn't get very far" because Valve's new engine, Source 2, was ill-suited to building a shooter at the time. "There was no lighting solution, no save and restore, no visibility solution. A huge amount of tech was needed."

Half-Life 3 wasn't the only *Half-Life* project in development during this period. Intended to form part of its 2016 VR game *The Lab*, Valve created a prototype for a *Half-Life* themed FPS experience called *Shooter*. Described by Valve's Jim Murray as "a *Half-Life* ride in a theme park", *Shooter* had potential, but Valve ran out of time to make it ready for launch.

Valve had also prototyped at least one, and possibly two other VR games in this period. First, there was *Alyx & Dog*, a purported VR title that saw players exploring the *Half-Life* world as Alyx with Dog as their companion. Little is known about the game, but there is concept art from Valve showing Alyx and Dog traversing a range of environments. Around 2015, Valve began concepting *Borealis*, a VR game themed around Valve's elusive ghost ship led by Marc Laidlaw. "It was too early to be building anything in VR," Laidlaw said to Rock, Paper, Shotgun. "It all evaporated pretty quickly." The existence of this project also lends credence to Robin Walker's claim that *Epistle 3* does not necessarily represent the canonical ending of the *Half-Life* story.

Alyx's release seemed to fill in the gaps left by Valve over the last decade. But there may still be more we don't know about *Half-Life 3*. In February this year, *Half-Life* YouTuber Tyler McVicker uploaded a video to YouTube in which he discusses "a conversation" he had with a "former Valve employee", about a prototype of *Half-Life 3* that sounds very different from what David Spreyer revealed around the launch of *Alyx*.

According to McVicker, this iteration of *Half-Life 3* would commence with Gordon Freeman awakening in Aperture Science, 20 years after the events of *Half-Life 2*. Freeman would then travel to a city in the "destroyed ruins of America", joining a ragtag group of rebels who see him as a "curse instead of a messiah". Equipped with a

new "robot arm" that "effectively turned him into the Last Airbender", Gordon would proceed to a facility run by Cremators and convince them to help him overthrow the leadership of this American city. McVicker claims this prototype would have been in development around 2013-2014, and was cancelled by 2015 due to "internal conflict" within Valve over whether the next *Half-Life* should be flatscreen or VR.

It's hard to know how seriously to take this. McVicker himself says his words should be "viewed as speculation" until Valve confirms otherwise. Yet it's worth examining in light of what Valve has already confirmed about *Half-Life 3*. Although McVicker's outline sounds very different from David Spreyer's prototype, nothing McVicker says makes the two incompatible. Indeed, Spreyer never discusses the story or worldbuilding for his prototype, only the procedural mechanics. Moreover, the development window is roughly the same. Hence, it's possible McVicker's outline represents the broader narrative concept for Spreyer's mechanical prototype.

POINT EXTRACTION

In summary, the challenging development of *Half-Life 2* left Valve averse to the idea of building a conventional third *Half-Life* game, so the company opted to release *Half-Life 3* in bitesize episodes, making the project more manageable and taking advantage of Steam. Yet by 2007, the episodic model was outdated, and Valve couldn't find a way to make *Episode 3* an artistic solution to a technical problem as *Episode 1* and the *Orange Box* had been. Eventually, *Episode 3* was cancelled, and through internet speculation and Valve's cryptic allusions, the narrative becomes that the next *Half-Life* game will be *Half-Life 3*.

After completing *Portal 2*, Valve felt ready to tackle ground-up game development again, and as it began building Source 2, it also experimented with either one or several *Half-Life 3* prototypes, one of which definitely featured procedural generation, while another may have involved Freeman liberating an American city with a physics-enhanced robot arm.

Then, in July 2012, John Carmack appears at E3 with the early prototype for Oculus Rift, and Valve sees in VR a revolutionary technology that can be used to make a landmark *Half-Life* title. By 2015, *Half-Life 3* is dead, and Valve begins development of *Half-Life: Alyx* the following year, releasing the game to acclaim in March 2020.

After all this, 16 years and a whole new game, Valve left fans in almost exactly position they had been in before, dangling over the edge of a narrative cliff with no resolution in sight. But one thing has changed. We now know Valve's interest in making *Half-Life* games remains, and may in fact have grown during development of *Alyx*. Compare Robin Walker's words on the launch of *Half-Life: Alyx* to how Valve talked about finishing *Half-Life 2*. "We really enjoyed making this game," Walker told Kotaku in March 2020. "I think we'd really like to keep making some games like this again." ■

VALVE
HAD ALSO
PROTOTYPED
AT LEAST ONE,
AND POSSIBLY
TWO OTHER VR
GAMES IN THIS
PERIOD



Half-Life 2 cut content

Leftover pieces of content provide some clues to the shape of *Half-Life 3*



Air Exchange

A cut level from *Half-Life 2*, the Air Exchange was conceived as interfering with Earth's atmosphere in some way.

Borealis

Originally known as the Hyperborea, the Borealis has loomed in the background of *Half-Life* since the first draft of *Half-Life 2*. It likely would have played a central role in *Episode 3*.



Kraken Base

Kraken Base appeared after the Borealis. Given its Arctic location, it's possible Kraken Base influenced designs for *Episode 3*.



Cremator

These strange creatures were conceived as a kind of cleaner enemy. Versions of them were cut from *Half-Life 2* and *Half-Life: Alyx*.

SUBSCRIBE TODAY

and get a **Nacon RIG400 headset** with every print or bundle subscription

FREE GIFT

- Lightweight, flexible and durable.
- Sound-isolating ear cups, with memory foam.
- 40mm high-sensitivity drivers deliver crisp powerful sound.
- Inline controls let you easily adjust game volume and mute your mic.



WORTH
£39^{.99}





GREAT REASONS TO SUBSCRIBE

- ➔ Brilliant value – save money on the cover price
- ➔ You'll never miss an issue
- ➔ Delivered direct to your door

Choose your package

Four manageable payments over the course of the year, giving you a year's worth of issues in a flexible, affordable way

PRINT



**FREE
GIFT
INCLUDED**

£18.²⁵

EVERY THREE MONTHS

13 issues of PC Gamer in print
over **12 months**

SAVE 19%

PRINT + DIGITAL



**FREE
GIFT
INCLUDED**

£21.⁹⁹

EVERY THREE MONTHS

13 issues of PC Gamer in print
and digital over **12 months**

SAVE 38%

DIGITAL



£7.⁵⁰

EVERY THREE MONTHS

13 issues of PC Gamer in
digital over **12 months**

SAVE 42%

How to subscribe

Visit: www.magazinesdirect.com/PCG/C45C

Or call: 0330 333 1113 and quote 'C45C'

TERMS & CONDITIONS: Offer closes 31/10/2023. Offer open to new UK subscribers only. Pricing is guaranteed for the first 12 months and we will notify you in advance of any price changes. Please allow up to six weeks for delivery of your first subscription issue (up to eight weeks overseas). Your gift will be delivered separately within 60 days after your first payment has cleared. Free gift is not available on digital subscriptions. Your gift will be delivered separately within 60 days after your first payment has cleared. Gifts only available to subscribers on the UK mainland. In the unlikely event that we run out of this gift, we promise to offer you an alternative gift of the same or greater value. The full subscription rate is for 12 months (13 issues) and includes postage and packaging. If the magazine ordered changes frequency per annum, we will honour the number of issues paid for, not the term of the subscription. For full terms and conditions, visit www.magazinesdirect.com/terms. For enquiries please call: +44 (0) 330 333 1113. Lines are open Monday- Friday 9am- 5pm UK Time or e-mail: help@magazinesdirect.com. Calls to 0330 numbers will be charged at no more than a national landline call, and may be included in your phone provider's call bundle.

REVIEW

HOW WE REVIEW

We review each game on its own merits, and try to match it to a reviewer who's a passionate expert in the field. The main aim of reviews is to help you make buying decisions. To this end, we're selective about what we review, and try to focus on the notable, interesting, exciting or surprising.

DOWNLOADABLE CONTENT

DLC might be new missions for a game, or it might be a single new item. If we think you want to know about it, we'll review it.

EARLY ACCESS

Any released alpha, beta, or otherwise unfinished game that you can currently pay for. For these games, we won't assign a score, but we will tell you whether they're worth your time.

THEY'RE BACK

Whenever there's a bargain or re-release of a significant game, our expert will revisit it and tell you whether it holds up today. With jokes.

OUR SCORING SYSTEM EXPLAINED

00%-09% Broken or offensively bad; absolutely no value.

Example *Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude*

10%-19% We might be able to find one nice thing to say about it, but still not worth anyone's time or money.

Example *Gettysburg: Armored Warfare*

20%-29% Completely falls short of its goals. Very few redeeming qualities.

Examples *Family Guy: Back to the Multiverse*

30%-39% An entirely clumsy or derivative effort. There's little reason to play this game over a similar, better one.

Examples *Trials of the Blood Dragon*

40%-49% Flawed and disappointing.

Examples *Aliens: Colonial Marines*

50%-59% Mediocre. Other games probably do it better, or its unique qualities aren't executed well.

Examples *Primordia, Homefront: The Revolution*

60%-69% There's something to like here, but it can only be recommended with major caveats.

Examples *No Man's Sky, Ghost Recon: Wildlands*

70%-79% A good game that's worth playing. We like it.

Examples *Prey, NieR: Automata*

80%-89% A great game with exceptional moments or features, and touches of brilliance. We love it.

Examples *Overwatch, Night in the Woods*

90%-94% A compelling recommendation for most PC gamers. Important to PC gaming, and likely ahead of its time.

Examples *Bayonetta, Dishonored 2*

95%-96% Far and away one of the best games we've ever played. We recommend it to the entire world.

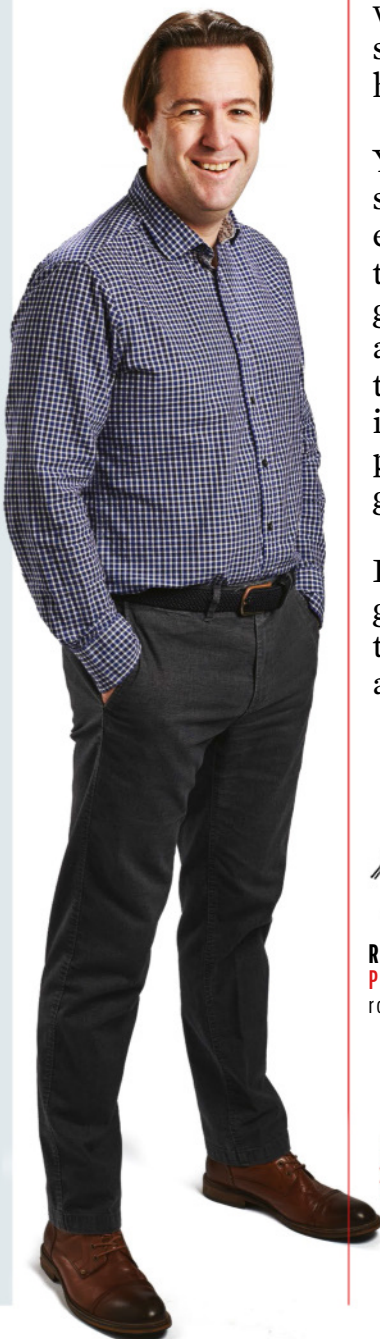
Examples *Half-Life 2, Kerbal Space Program*

97%-100% Advances the human species. Boosts the immune systems of nearby children and small animals.



The Editor's Choice award is granted in addition to the score, at the discretion of the PC Gamer staff. It represents exceptional quality or innovation.

Find out more
www.bit.ly/pcgreviews



Surprising catch

When fantastic and innovative games like *Dave the Diver* and *Viewfinder* come out of left field and take the PC gaming world by storm, with big critical and commercial success, I'm always reminded of just how amazing our hobby is.

Yes, sure, console gamers get these sort of pleasant surprises as well every now and then, but thanks to the far more open nature of the PC gaming industry (which can also be a hindrance at times, admittedly, too), we get more innovation and indie hits, with small teams producing some truly amazing gaming experiences.

PC gaming is often where gamers get to experience the *new* first, and that continues to enthuse me even after PC gaming going-on 30 years.

R. Jones

ROBERT JONES

PRINT EDITOR

robert.jones@futurenet.com

**LET US KNOW
WHAT YOU THINK**

Email us via letters@pcgamer.com with your reactions, or simply tweet us your thoughts @PCGamer



Contents

- 64** Jagged Alliance 3
- 68** Aliens: Dark Descent
- 70** Oxenfree 2: Lost Signals
- 72** Dave the Diver
- 74** Lakeburg Legacies
- 76** Exoprimal
- 80** Layers of Fear
- 82** The Last Worker

- 84** Viewfinder
- 86** Ghost Trick: Phantom Detective

FREE GAMES

- 88** Chainged
- 89** Sandtrix
- 89** The Pulse of Evil

THEY'RE BACK

- 90** Heavy Rain
- 91** Sniper Elite 4
- 91** Rise of the Tomb Raider

This month's Sushi-eating reviewers...



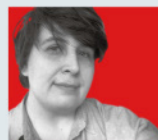
RICK LANE
Specialist in
Hiding in vents
Currently playing
Aliens: Dark Descent
This month
Shouted "Game over man! Game over!" far too many times. Hid in a series of vents.



JODY MACGREGOR
Specialist in
Spooky radio stations
Currently playing
Oxenfree 2: Lost Signals
This month
Listened to Eerie Dead People Talk Shit 102.1FM. Had to sleep with the light on.



DOMINIC TARASON
Specialist in
Getting his arse kicked
Currently playing
Jagged Alliance 3
This month
Hung out with a series of '80s action movie hero knockoffs. Made Hideo Kojima well jel.



KERRY BRUNSKILL
Specialist in
Meaningless marriages
Currently playing
Lakeburg Legacies
This month
Watched a series of widows immediately remarry following the death of their partner.



MATT ELLIOTT
Specialist in
Slow-mo kills
Currently playing
Sniper Elite 4
This month
Researched if Hitler had one ball. Shot Hitler in his one ball in slow motion.



TROPIC PLUNDER

After 24 years, **JAGGED ALLIANCE 3** is here to take a shot at the squad tactics crown

By Dominic Tarason

After nearly a quarter of a century, *Jagged Alliance* is kicking my arse again, and I couldn't be happier. Poor luck, hubris, cheaping out on mercenary contracts plus a drizzle of enemy mortar fire has ended a 25-hour campaign with little chance of recovery. I'm not even mad – that was a spectacular last stand. I know what I did wrong. I start again, hiring an all-new team. Next time it'll be different.

While *XCOM* has become synonymous with squad tactics, I've always carried a torch for Sir-Tech's 1999 gem *Jagged Alliance 2*. A heady, mix of tactical gunfights, mercenary management and RPG dialogue, sidequests and looting. It was also hard, but frustration was kept low through depth of combat and a deeply irreverent tone halfway between *Commando* and *The A-Team*, riffing on action films of the era.

Until now, nobody has recaptured that spark. The darker, edgier and joyless *Jagged Alliance: Rage!* felt like the end. Thankfully, *Tropico* developer Haemimont Games had other ideas. Even though squad tactics aren't their usual wheelhouse, I'm happy to say that *Jagged Alliance 3* modernises

and streamlines while still capturing the original's spirit. It's old-school at heart, and goofy as ever.

DOG-EAT-DOG WORLD

Taking place just a couple years after the '90s original, *JA3* is set in the former French African colony of Grand Chien (translated: Big Dog), rich in diamond mines and opportunists. A local warlord has kidnapped Grand Chien's president, and his daughter wants you to lead a squad of bad enough dudes/dudettes to liberate him and possibly the country too. Unfortunately, with only \$40,000 you'll be calling on the B-Team. I wouldn't have it any other way.

Most of *JA2*'s mercenaries return here, plus a handful of newcomers,

Most of *JA2*'s mercenaries return here, plus a handful of newcomers

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A massive modern-day squad tactics RPG with '90s action movie soul

EXPECT TO PAY

£40

DEVELOPER

Haemimont Games

PUBLISHER

THQ Nordic

REVIEWED ON

Intel Core i9-13900k, 64GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 4090

MULTIPLAYER

Two-player online co-op

LINK

jaggedalliance.com

which means you'll have a multinational bunch of misfits to pick from. While the jokey tone and scenery-chewing performances may turn some off, I feel it's fundamental to the experience, and provided me plenty of chuckles. Unlike your average tactics game, every merc is a fully realised RPG party member, with around 36 available for hire, and a few more to pick up in the field. Some are professionals, some are dumbasses and almost all are likeable.

While the new voice cast have impressively nailed the returning characters, I liked the newcomers too. Special credit to Leili 'Livewire' Idrisi, a cheerful young Pakistani engineer. Good for repairing gear, offering people snacks on long trips and also hacking devices using her custom PDA; a permanent inventory item that the game notes is covered in cute stickers.

Every character gets plenty of voiced chatter, in combat and out, often interjecting in conversations with NPCs. Some have friends and rivals they'll banter and beef with, and with four to six making a squad, there's enough to play the campaign repeatedly with different vibes.



RIGHT: The end of my first campaign. A spectacular last stand against the odds.





TOP: A good headshot is satisfying enough to raise morale and AP.

ABOVE: Weapon customisation can cost a lot, but it's worth it.

PROJECTILE MOTION

Combat in *JA3* splits the difference between its predecessor's simulation-heavy approach and modern *XCOM*'s more readable battlefields and systems. Movement is action point based, affected by agility stats, morale, degree of rest and other factors, but it's visually intuitive. The movement grid shows a 'blue' move radius where you'll have enough AP to shoot from. If you've played a modern tactics game it's easy to jump in and start, but the process of putting bullets in bad guys is far more granular than a dice-roll.

Each bullet is a physical object leaving the gun's barrel, travelling towards a target. If it hits anything along the way they'll do their damage there instead. There's no to-hit percentages, just an aiming cone based on gear and stats. Spending extra action points to aim tightens it up, giving fights an intuitive feel.

Unless broken, cover stops bullets, but limbs poking out can be hit by stray fire or individually aimed at. Headshots are lethal, arm shots hurt accuracy and leg shots slow. A stray bullet can cause a lot of grief, encouraging cautious movement, swinging the camera around to make sure everyone's behind cover. Armour helps, but it wears down, forcing you to spend time between fights assigning mercs repair duty.

A lot of *JA2*'s more fiddly elements have been shaved down.

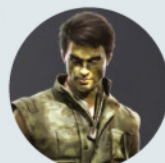


BACK IN ACTION

Four fan-favourite returning mercs, barely aged a day



BOBBY 'STERIOD' GONTARSKI
Sounds like a bad Arnold Schwarzenegger impersonator. Punches like a good one. Fixes stuff, too.



KYLE 'SHADOW' SIMMONS
Solid Snake as played by young Charlie Sheen. Stealthy, deadly, but prefers to infiltrate alone, so a potentially risky hire.

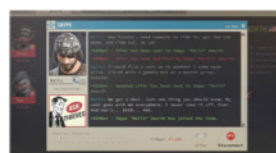


TEX R COLBURN
A rare reverse weeb. A cowboy-obsessed gunslinger from Japan. Eccentric, but his 'Dance for me' special attack cleans house.



HELMUT 'GRUNTY' GRUNTHER
Ready for a day at the murder office. A professional, and a quicker draw than Tex.





While enemies can be snuck up on (and taken down) during the real-time infiltration phase before the shooting starts, once turn-based combat begins all characters have 360 degree vision and facing isn't taken into account to shoot. JA2's Stamina and Morale bars are replaced by simple buffs and debuffs. Honestly, I don't miss them, and there's interesting systems to fill those gaps.

Every merc now has a unique ability – some passive, some active, giving combat a different feel for every party. Each weapon type has a perk too. SMGs spray defensively while moving, machine guns dig in for accurate overwatch and so on. There's less micromanagement in combat, but more tactical options giving JA3 its own feel.

TOP: Not every enemy in Grand Chien comes on two legs.

FAR LEFT: This geriatric arms dealer is a standout among a wacky cast...

ABOVE: Some mercs insist on haggling even before weird personal demands.

ANATOMY OF A GUNFIGHT

Where you shoot someone really matters

1 HEAD
Hard to hit, but deals massive damage so long as there's no helmet.

2 ARMS
Less damage, hits 'em with the 'Inaccurate' debuff.



3 TORSO
Baseline average damage, easiest to hit, most likely armoured.

4 GROIN
A tough shot but hurts more, and inflicts the Suppressed debuff.

5 LEGS
Lowest damage, but inflicts the nasty Slowed debuff.

RAMBO QUEST 64

The strategic and RPG layers are what really set *Jagged Alliance* apart. Grand Chien is an explorable open world, with towns full of mostly French-accented NPCs, many with sidequests. There's diamond mines to capture for income, forts that spawn forces to recapture territories, ports for faster water movement and other strategic concerns. On the map, mercs can spend time to heal, train militia, craft ammo, repair gear and modify weapons using parts breaking down unwanted guns.

Knowing what to do at any given time is initially difficult, and you can

only really learn through feeling your way through it. While the campaign is lengthy and non-linear, over time enemy aggression gradually ramps up, story events can force you into battles you weren't planning for, and dawdling causes mines to dry up, leaving you cash starved. While it's easy to replace lost mercs, too many setbacks can cause a doom-spiral. Potentially frustrating, but each time I play the game I learn a little bit more. There's real depth here.

One area where *JA3* stands head and shoulders above its predecessors is its world map. Every square on the map is a bespoke battlefield, often with underground areas and loot-caches to find.

There's a lot of interesting verticality, and maps have a set of annotations gained from scouting or hacking for intel, indicating vantage points or patrol routes.

It makes Grand Chien feel like a country, rather than just abstract tiles. It's also a handsome-looking game. The battlefields are detailed and gorgeously lit, with weather and time-of-day looking great and having effects on combat.

Even on Normal difficulty, *Jagged Alliance 3* is complex and challenging, with overconfidence and underspending capable of kneecapping progress. While enemies aren't especially smart (they're Hollywood goons, after all), a single crit from a sniper or a full-auto burst from an assault rifle can ruin a merc's

day, and you'll almost always be outnumbered. There's also toggles to enable Ironman mode and have mercs just drop dead at zero health instead of going into a recoverable bleeding state, for the more masochistic amongst us.

I'm sure there are players who'll waltz through the campaign (there's even an achievement for completing the game with just one character), but for my next run I'm enabling Forgiving Mode, the one difficulty-lowering option. Giving you a small daily income and reducing the time and resources spent recovering between fights does nothing to mitigate damage in combat, but it'll

let me play a little more aggressively. A good set of training wheels for newcomers (or rusty vets), but still tougher than most tactics games at their lower settings.

There are some areas where *JA3* falls short of its predecessor

JAGGED EDGES

There are some areas where *JA3* falls short of its predecessor. The fake retro internet you could browse has been heavily truncated, with cute elements like taking out life insurance policies, a mercenary obituaries site and even ordering flowers for your arch-enemy sadly gone. The Institute For Mercenary Profiling (IMP) site is still up, and taking their tongue-in-cheek personality quiz lets you generate a single (entirely optional) custom character. Well worth doing, as what they lack in personality, they make up for in working pro bono.

Another flaw is the UI in general. I often found the tooltips and stat blocks shown in combat intrusively chunky, leaving me wishing they were half the size. The same applies to inventory screens, requiring scrolling through your merc's highly detailed backpacks and stashes, with no auto-sorting or cleanup options. It's overly fiddly without good reason and can turn re-equipping an entire squad into a chore.

While the battlefields are gorgeous and each merc has a distinct character model (unaffected by armour worn), there's a few areas where it's clear that this isn't a mega-budget production. Character animations can be a little stiff (especially knockdown animations from shotguns and explosives), and gore effects look a bit cheap, with blood looking more like someone spray-painted wounded characters bright red. It's nitpicking, but other recent games have done better.

Those flaws take some lustre off this otherwise excellent strategy RPG, but only enough to downgrade it to a strong recommendation.

Haemimont has promised extensive mod support shortly after launch, letting players create new maps, characters, gear and new stories. By the time I've cracked this campaign, there'll be more battles to fight. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

There's a few bolts that could be tightened up here and there, but *Jagged Alliance* is back in business.

81



RIGHT: Decisions, decisions. Stealthy sniping can be a complex affair.



BUG RAPPORT

ALIENS: DARK DESCENT takes a more tactical approach to xenomorph blasting

By Rick Lane

Many games have tried to replicate the slow burning tension and chaotic action of *Aliens*, but *Dark Descent* is the first game since Monolith's *AvP 2* to really nail it. Developer Tindalos Interactive has thought intensely about how to get the best out of James Cameron's film in a virtual context, and their solution is a scintillating real-time tactics game that blends stealth, strategy, and nail-biting gunfights.

Dark Descent plays its weakest card first. The game takes place on Lethe, a xenomorph-infested moon owned by Weyland Yutani, and where the Marine frigate USS Otago has the misfortune to crash-land. The cause of the crash is detailed in a story-driven tutorial

prologue, but the script is a mess of forced conflicts and awkward dialogue, a draining parasite that plagues the game throughout.

Once stranded on Lethe, the stories you create compensate for the narrative shortcomings. Each mission sees you dispatch a four-person team of Marines to locations around Lethe, either to improve your situation or investigate why the Moon is overrun with bugs. The first takes you to a facsimile of Hadley's

Hope named Dead Hills, a sprawling shake 'n' bake colony with numerous buildings laid out across multiple floors. There's a bar, an armoury, a clinic, a command centre, and underneath it all, a twisting warren of mining tunnels.

The script is a mess of forced conflicts and awkward dialogue

TACTICS GAMES

Unlike most tactics games, you control the entire squad simultaneously, moving them with the right-mouse button and interacting with the left. It feels odd at first.

As you skulk around the mission, exploring buildings and highlighting interactable items with your shoulder-lamp, your motion-tracker in the bottom-right of the screen tracks any movement within 60 metres. Whenever possible, you want

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

Hyper-tense real-time tactics game with a light sprinkling of strategy

EXPECT TO PAY

£30

DEVELOPER

Tindalos Interactive

PUBLISHER

Focus Entertainment

REVIEWED ON

AMD Ryzen 5 3600, 32GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce 2080 Super

MULTIPLAYER

No

LINK

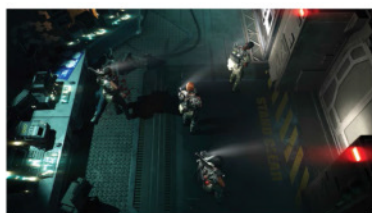
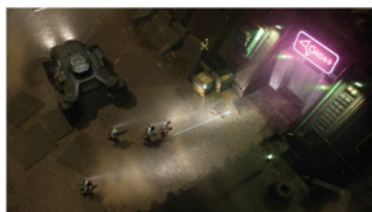
focus-entmt.com/en/games/aliens-dark-descent

to avoid the skittering white dots it highlights, not just because xenomorphs are a bad hang, but because whenever you encounter them, it'll be worse than last time.

Your squad will automatically shoot to keep the creatures at bay, but that alone is rarely enough to stop them. Hitting the spacebar opens up a more elaborate skill menu. Suppressive fire will slow encroaching aliens in a wide cone, while grenades and shotgun blasts are useful for eliminating threats.

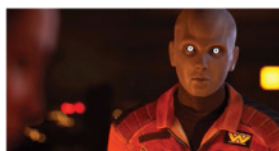
Dark Descent's tactical fundamentals are all about knowing when to stick and when to twist. Yet no matter how well you fend off the xenomorphs, there will be lingering consequences. Every attack increases alien aggressiveness, represented by a creeping ticker in the top right of the screen. When this shifts up a gear, not only will more aliens prowl the mission area, they'll also send a massive horde in your direction.

All this combines to create a thrilling rollercoaster of tension, where a single xeno wandering into a room can spiral into an intense, protracted battle that could leave your marines terrified, maimed,



ABOVE: Resting helps your squad relieve stress, but you need to weld all the doors shut first.





TOP: Your Marines defend themselves automatically. The tactics emerge from positioning and deft use of special abilities.

ABOVE: Seegson Synthetics are back, and as creepy as ever.

abducted, or dead. And this all comes before you think about completing objectives, which are often as multilayered and uncompromising as your battles with the xenomorphs. Indeed, a key element of *Dark Descent* is knowing when to pull the plug on a mission, and retreat to the Otago to lick your wounds and send back a fresh squad the next day.

It's a fascinating mixture of ideas with tons of emergent conundrums. This occurs both at the small scale, such as choosing where to set up your defences when an alien onslaught is imminent, and the larger scale, like using a day to return to a previous mission to pick up additional resources and collect those broken sentry turrets you left behind. There are a few smaller problems, like marines getting stuck on world geometry, but it's in the storytelling where the quality dips.

Is *Dark Descent* to *Aliens* what *Isolation* is to *Alien*? In how it builds the best game it can out of the themes and ideas of the film it is based on, absolutely. The execution isn't far off either. Even with its shortfalls, it's the most enjoyable and authentic *Aliens* game I've played. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

A generator of tension and tactical decisions, *Aliens: Dark Descent* is a script pass away from being an all-timer.

84

Character designs have a distinctive, slightly angular appearance.



SQUAD UP *Get the most out of your guys*

1 RANK
Ranks are levels, with Marines gaining perks that make them stronger as they are promoted.

2 CLASS
Class defines your Marines' role. Tekkers can hack locked doors, while gunners can wield the powerful Smartgun.

3 NEGATIVE TRAIT
All Marines have a negative trait. This can be removed using a special Rank perk.



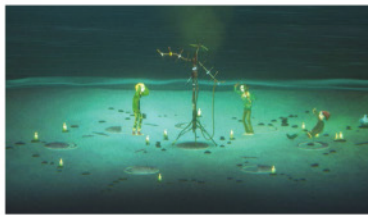
4 TRAUMA LEVEL
A Marine's trauma level increases each mission, and can lead to them gaining further negative traits.

5 LOADOUT
Each Marine can carry a primary weapon, a sidearm and a special weapon.

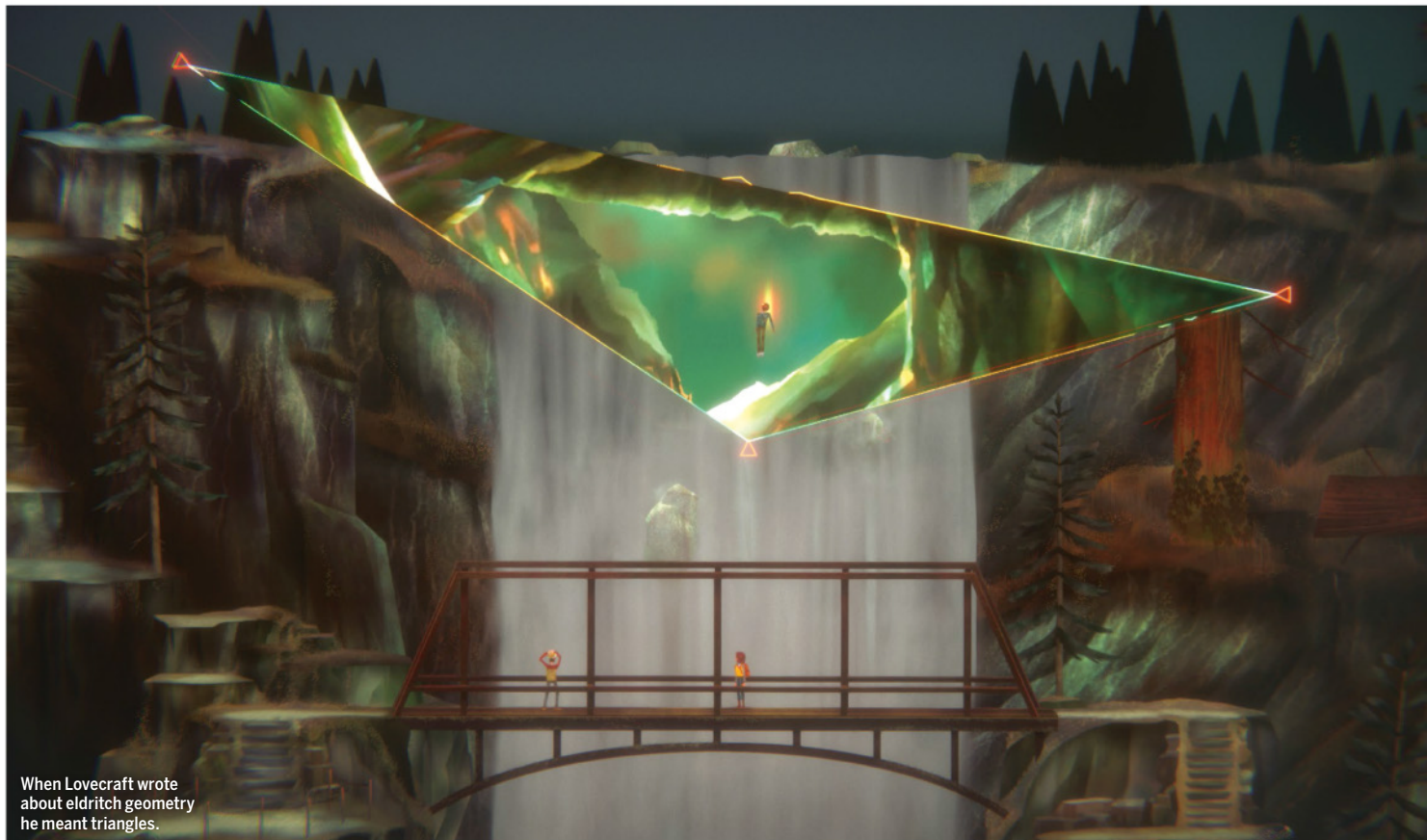
Video didn't kill
the radio star,
this did.



RIGHT: You kids
should be getting
drunk, not performing
arcane rituals.



FAR RIGHT: The
adventure game bits
have such obvious
solutions they seem
like parody.



When Lovecraft wrote
about eldritch geometry
he meant triangles.

DEJA BOO

The time ghosts haunting the radio waves return in **OXENFREE 2: LOST SIGNALS**

By Jody Macgregor

When I care about a game's characters I stop walking if they launch into conversations, because I'm afraid I'll cross some invisible line that triggers more plot-critical dialogue to override it. What if I never hear the end of that Garrus story? Though I liked the talkative teenagers stranded on a spooky island in the original *Oxenfree* back in 2016, I never stopped walking to listen to them chat.

Partly that was because they'd return to important topics with seamless "like I was saying" asides. Mostly it was because they said so much about so little I never felt at risk of losing out on anything I was going to care about.

Oxenfree 2: Lost Signals is about adults, and that changes things. It's still a game of criss-crossing a haunted and strange 2.5-dimensional slice of the Pacific

Northwest while regularly tuning your radio to Eerie Dead People Talk Shit 102.1FM. It's just that this time the characters being messed with by what might be ghosts or time travellers – or might be both, depending how the wavelength collapses – are less worried about whether a girl thinks they're cool.

One advantage of *Oxenfree 2* dealing with adults is that after it comes out the internet won't be full of middle-aged people banging on about whether or not it's an accurate representation of how teens really

talk. The other is that its characters are less likely to interrupt each other.

THE TALKING DEAD

The dialogue system was *Oxenfree*'s most notable feature, simulating the way kids shout over each other in movies like *The Goonies*. No one stopped for you to consider which response to choose, and you never knew whether you'd wait

until your friend finished what they were saying, or cut them off. Combined with responses that faded quickly if you didn't pick one, talking became a minefield of stress.

Which is exactly how it feels when you're a teenager. Even if I didn't end up caring about the individuals in *Oxenfree* as much as I did any given alien in *Mass Effect*, I was totally invested in my awkward attempts to impress them.

In *Oxenfree 2*, fully adult if not always that mature protagonist Riley has longer to consider her options

Protagonist Riley has longer to consider her options

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
The kind of horror game that's not really scary, and so perfect for people who don't like horror

EXPECT TO PAY
£19

DEVELOPER
Night School Studio

PUBLISHER
Netflix

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 9 5900X, 32GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 3080

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
nightschoolstudio.com/oxenfree-ii

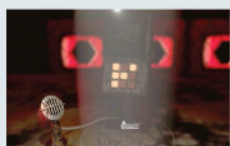
She interrupts people less too. *Oxenfree 2* lets you engage in walk-and-talks even when you're alone by giving you a walkie-talkie, and you have to wait for people to say "over" before you have your turn because that's how they work.

If you need to hear a friendly voice while climbing a cliff (something else that works better now, with Riley less likely to re-mount a wall or ladder when you click to walk away from it), you can check in with one of the other people dealing with mysterious anomalies, adding to a sense there's a whole world of paranormal phenomena going on.

I did miss out on befriending a radio DJ because I didn't listen to her show at the right time, however. So yeah, it's still easy to miss things. Like the first game, I recommend turning on subtitles. At one point I stopped at the edge of a screen rather than enter a cave because I didn't want to miss some dialogue, and a helpful note appeared to tell me the conversation would continue. Later I confidently crossed a screen divide while a sailor talked about nautical weirdness, only to be interrupted by a ringing payphone and never find out what he was going to say. The system's still not perfect, but it's certainly better.

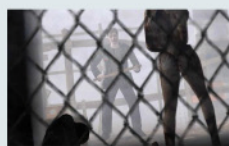
Oxenfree and its sequel are the kind of horror games you can recommend to people who don't like horror games, more about feeling off-kilter than gore, but when *Oxenfree 2* really goes for it, it's creepy as hell. The way characters get thrown around like broken dolls is weirdly upsetting to see, and when I adjust the dial and tune into 93FM, All Ghosts Predicting Your Future All the Time, I get a genuine chill. ■

RADIO SLAYS *The scariest radios in videogames*



SIGNALIS

The world of *Signalis* has space travel, but relies on radio for communication, puzzle door solutions, and encrypting grotesque images.



SILENT HILL SERIES

"Huh, radio? What's going on with that radio?" What's going on is that it fuzzes with static whenever monsters approach. RTFM, you dingus.



VAMPIRE: THE MASQUERADE - BLOODLINES

Listening to Deb of Night's station will turn you into a fan of the Genitorturers.

PC GAMER VERDICT

Oxenfree 2 from Night School Studio is a mature second run at the walk-and-talk formula.

85

SHRIMPY THE BEST

DAVE THE DIVER is packed with charm, surprises, and fish

By Christopher Livingston

How it started: Oh, this looks like a cute, simple little fishing and restaurant management game. I bet it'll be great on my Steam Deck. How it's going: Oh, this is easily the best game of 2023. I'm routinely up playing until 2am, even after 30 hours it's still throwing fun and creative new systems at me, and every time I play I'm delighted, surprised and utterly charmed. And, yes, it is great on my Steam Deck.

In 2D pixel adventure *Dave the Diver*, you split your time between spearfishing in a colourful patch of ocean and using the fish you catch in the sushi restaurant you manage. It's simple at first: Each day you swim around impaling fish with a harpoon and collecting crafting resources and other ingredients like seaweed from the reef. The diving is a delight, mostly a chill and soothing experience with colourful fish darting here and there and kelp gently swaying in the ocean currents – though that relaxing vibe can abruptly turn into a frenzied panic as a sawtooth shark tries to cut you in half or a pelican eel tries to swallow you whole before you escape to surface with your precious haul.

The diving is a delight, mostly a chill and soothing experience

In the evening you put together a menu for your inscrutable sushi chef, Bancho, who makes the meals while you serve a parade of customers in a frantic *Diner Dash*-style minigame.

You can use your earnings to redecorate the restaurant and upgrade your diving gear, and as your restaurant grows more popular you can have Bancho research new recipes, which will require new ingredients, which gives you new goals for the next day's dives.

The fishing and feeding portions of the game feed perfectly off one other, but things don't stay simple for long.

STARFISH VALLEY

Nearly every time I sat down to play *Dave the Diver* it threw a new feature

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A spearfishing and restaurant management adventure

EXPECT TO PAY
£17

DEVELOPER
Mintrocket

PUBLISHER
Nexon

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-9700K, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 2080

MULTIPLAYER
No
LINK
mintrocketgames.com/en/DaveTheDiver

or activity at me. Night fishing opens up the pursuit of new species and turns the once comforting ocean spooky, while new gear like tranquilisers and submersibles give you new ways to catch fish. A staff management system for the restaurant lets you hire and train workers to help out, increasing the number of customers you can serve and the speed at which you can serve them. There's a farm to breed fish so you don't have to rely entirely on daily dives, and a farm to grow rice and vegetables for new recipes, and eventually even an underwater farm to grow different types of seaweed. As soon as you've gotten comfortable with one system, the game throws a new one on top. There's a comfy daily routine to *Dave the Diver*, but it's constantly growing to incorporate new parts and pieces.

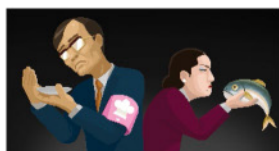
And that's just a few features sprinkled into the fishing and sushi portion of the game – there's way more to *Dave the Diver*, which is filled with diverting little surprises that pop up regularly throughout the 35 hours it took me to finish the main storyline. That's the wonderful thing about *Dave the Diver*: you can sit



ABOVE: The cutscenes are hilarious.



Powerful boss fights lurk in the depths.



TOP: A busy night includes serving food and cocktails.

ABOVE: Prepare to have your sushi judged.

FAR RIGHT: The perfect dish will transport your customers.



down to do a day of diving and have no idea where you'll wind up.

You might abruptly become involved in a speedboat chase sequence or find yourself photographing evidence of an undersea society or in the midst of an unexpected boss fight with a furious jellyfish the size of a bus. There are even moments where you control other characters besides Dave – and in one fantastic sequence you control both Dave and another character at the same time, briefly turning it into a co-op (but still singleplayer) puzzle-solving adventure. Even the credits sequence gives you a great new game to learn and play, and you can keep diving and serving sushi even after the main quest is complete.

Tying it all together is the stunning pixel art, with roughly 200 lovingly detailed and animated sea creatures, and characters that manage to be expressive whether they're filling the screen in a cutscene or just wiggling around as tiny little figures on your monitor. *Dave the Diver* is a real treat, the biggest surprise of 2023 and hands-down my favourite game of the year so far. ■



PC GAMER VERDICT

Charming, deep and constantly surprising, *Dave the Diver* is packed with activities and full of heart.

91



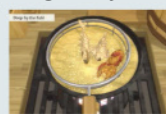
MEGAGAMES

Dave the Diver is a game filled with other games



SEAHORSE RACING

Catch seahorses, add them to your roster, and race them for cash prizes.



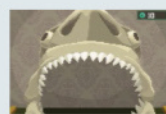
SUSHI COOKING

Yes, sometimes you'll get to cook meals yourself in a tricky, fast-paced mini-game.



DUFF'S DREAM

Duff likes weapons and anime, and dreams about one of those things in this weird rhythm game.



SHARK TEETH

Based on strategy-math game *Nim*, try not to get stuck with the last tooth or you'll get bitten!

MARRY, DIE, REPEAT

It's (not) all about family in **LAKEBURG LEGACIES**

By Kerry Brunskill

Avillager dies in their 40s after a life of hard labour leaving behind a beloved partner and young child. How does their widow react in *Lakeburg Legacies*, a self-styled “social-based village management sim where love is your favourite resource”? By immediately hoping to remarry. You’d think they’d let their past love’s corpse go cold before they moved in with someone else, but according to this game, that’s not how love goes.

It’s just one of many strange contradictions lurking in a superficially cute ‘n’ cosy game that claims to put the lives and lineages of the randomly generated people who pass through my village first, only to then give them less personality than an *Age of Empires* shepherd.

Lakeburg Legacies does at least start off on the right foot, making it crystal clear that sexual preferences just aren’t a thing here. Anyone can marry anyone they’re not related to, and any couple can have children. Which would be great if only the whole ‘falling in love’ business hadn’t been reduced to nothing more than a quick click through three random micro-scenarios pulled from a disappointingly small list. All love

needs, apparently, is me as a disembodied cursor correctly remembering at least one thing on the prospective partner’s short list of likes and dislikes. Oh, you hate flowers too but have opposing views on public executions? Quick, put a ring on it.

An oddly impersonal experience for a game about relationships

It’s a game with ten clever ideas that then trips into 20 ways to spoil them. That even extends to the way it treats its children: they’re the lifeblood of the village, but they’re also kicked out of their homes the instant they turn 18, or if two existing widowers move in together and there’s not enough room. Its only solution to this self-inflicted problem is to make toddlers wander the streets until they either die or survive until adulthood.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Build and grow a loved-up mediaeval village

EXPECT TO PAY
£19.32

DEVELOPER
Ishtar Games

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-10750H,
16GB RAM, Nvidia
GeForce RTX 3070

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
ishtar.games

KIDS AREN'T ALRIGHT

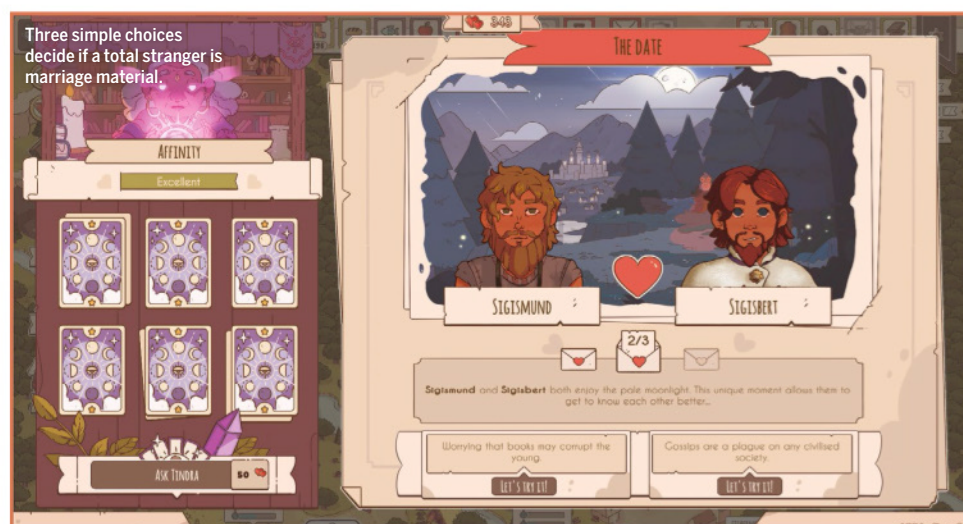
This is not only at odds with the community-focused village atmosphere the game is trying to push, it shows a distinct lack of imagination as well. *Lakeburg* can show me the precise relationship affinity debuff that occurs if a couple don’t support the same champion at a jousting tournament, but can’t envisage a couple living in two homes, or taking a knock to their productivity if they have to squeeze two children into one bedroom? Do my villagers honestly think so little of their own children?

Building up the village these people live in forms the other half of the game – but I don’t get to decide where any building’s placed, or even how many of them I can have. I can’t choose to make a village that thrives on exporting manufactured goods, or values the arts and welcoming social spaces above all else. I can’t even build two lumberjacks’ lodges if I keep running low on timber or have more skilled tree-felling labourers than I have vacancies to fill.

And although I had more to do as the game went on, it was just a greater quantity of the same things to



ABOVE: Marriage is an emotionless and easily clicked through affair.



MECHS APPEAL

Welcome to **EXOPRIMAL**, where everybody's gone to the raptors

By Phil Iwaniuk

It's raining dinosaurs. It's literally raining dinosaurs. I've absorbed a lot of gaming elevator pitches in my time, and *Exoprimal's* preposterous conceit is about as strong as they get – at least on a primal level. You look at a purple miasma forming in the sky, you watch a tide of velociraptors pour forth from it, and you say to yourself: I am absolutely going to be shooting at that.

I got a bit more conflicted after scratching that itch. Capcom's five-person PvPvE hero shooter is enjoyable. It has some fantastic ideas. And almost all of them carry frustrating limitations around their neck. In short, *Exoprimal's* launch state feels more like an Early Access phase than a finished game.

Before any extinct hides can be perforated, there's a surprising amount of narrative setup: it's 2043, and space-time rifts are popping up all over, spilling dinosaurs into the civilised world and stranding a crack team of gun-toting types on Bikitoa Island where an AI named Leviathan runs combat experiments for an unknown purpose. Luckily for us all, the Aibius corporation has sunk huge amounts of cash into developing exosuits to help organisations like our Hammerheads fight back against the hordes.

I didn't need this much detail to incentivise the shooting of dino tides,

but we have it anyway and it doesn't hurt. As you progress new text logs and cutscenes are added to the archive, a giant radial menu that slowly uncovers the mystery behind the dino-thunderstorms, the rifts,

Aibius and the AI. It brings to mind *Dead Rising's* piece-by-piece exposition mechanic, rewarding your game time with the next piece of the jigsaw. Gamifying even the way the story is told works surprisingly

well: I found my lizard brain stimulated by each new chunk of information even though I had little connection with the characters.

Beyond the cutscenes, down at ground level what we've got is a hybrid of co-op horde survival and the payload maps from *Overwatch* and *TF2*. Your squad of five heroes in mech suits is working together to clear each wave of dinosaurs as quickly as possible, because there's an opposing human team doing the exact same task in a live, parallel

Combat isn't just about survival but also time management

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A PvPvE hero shooter with all the dinosaurs

EXPECT TO PAY
£50

DEVELOPER
Capcom

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7 9700K, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 2080 Ti

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
exoprimal.com

instance. You only see them between horde stages in a match, as red silhouettes. If they finished the stage before you, you can see them running off to the next stage ahead of you. That's a really effective carrot dangling in front of you.

Conversely, if you smashed that triceratops miniboss faster than the opposing human team, as you're moving to the next area you'll see the silhouettes of the other team, still fighting their own triceratops. I've never felt more smug in my life than the first time I saw that.

There's a big payoff to this early game racing: the first team to clear every objective and make it to the final mode gets an actual head start, moving their payload along the track before you're even in the same dimension to contest their progress.

If that sounds a bit like *Destiny 2's* Gambit mode, that's only because it absolutely is. But after a handful of games, *Exoprimal's* rhythms make themselves known and I started to appreciate what Leviathan's endless combat trials are actually about: a focus on ruthless efficiency.

PRIMAL URGES

Combat isn't just about survival but also time management. It really matters how you combine heroes and abilities. This is *Exoprimal's* chance to assert its own identity beyond that of a Gambit clone, and your chance to play 4D chess with the roster of exosuits available to swap between.

And it almost comes together as something brilliant, if you catch it in the right light, in a good mood, during a vernal equinox. Most of the component parts are there – escalating jeopardy, room for experimentation, a roster of assault, tank and support characters whose abilities can interlace nicely if they're deployed thoughtfully. Witchdoctor's AoE healing ability covers the same radius as Krieger's shield dome, for example, so the two can create a circle of OP if they work together.

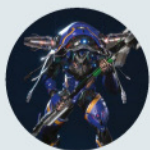
BRINGING MECHS-Y BACK

Exoprimal's four most enjoyable suits



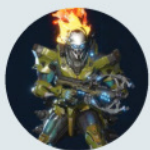
KRIEGER

A walking MG turret whose only worry in life is an overheating gun barrel.



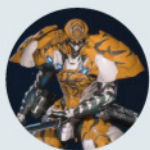
WITCHDOCTOR

Healer with a cattle prod close-range attack. Neither a witch nor a doctor.



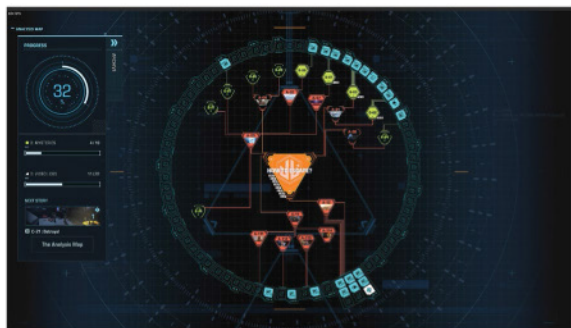
BARRAGE

Extremely adept at blowing things up, plus has flames for hair.



MURASAME

Imagine *Overwatch's* Genji as a melee-only tank character. The show-off's pick.



FAR LEFT: This is what's known as 'a sub-optimal strategy' for T-rex takedowns.

LEFT: The interstitial dashes between objectives really ramp up the PvP rivalry.



BELOW: Larger dinos require coordinated attacks to take down.



The plot's resolutely B-movie, but endearing.



RIGHT: Still more readable than the average *Overwatch* esports broadcast.

FAR RIGHT: Good teams stay bunched up close, so their AoE abilities stack.

BELOW: These pteranodons are the devil. Witchdoctor's chain lightning is the best counter.



☞ Murasame's right-click attack throws enemies up in the air where they're vulnerable to Vigilant's ranged attacks, and... well, truthfully it doesn't get much more tactical than that. At least not right now at launch.

There is some inherent joy in controlling these superpowered exosuits. When I play Krieger the

tanky machine-gunner, deploying shield domes big enough for the full squad to hunker down inside, I feel like quite the pro gamer. Blasting away at throngs of raptors, throwing up hit points everywhere and even doing a bit of

teamwork with those shields, then getting the match MVP for the sheer damage I dealt... it makes me smile.

Big dumb fun isn't in short supply. But a week in I can't see yet how the tactics and the way players use abilities will evolve over time. *Exoprimal* is mainly shooting or thwacking a big swarm of Jurassic Park background artists. I haven't yet played or even seen a super-effective exofighter combo akin to *TF2*'s Medic-Heavy partnership, a combination that fundamentally changes the action. Individual character abilities give you good feedback, but they don't alley-oop with someone else's abilities to give you that gratifying sense of fulfilling a tightly defined role. Despite the class delineations, everyone's a damage-dealer. The next exofighters on the roster need to be true specialists that change the way you play completely.

Although it's not quite as immaculately designed as its hero shooter rivals *TF2* or *Overwatch*, *Exoprimal* does manage to keep the action pretty readable. Voice lines sound off every time a character uses an ability, and those abilities all have unique visual effects and animations. So it's usually possible to maintain an idea of what all your teammates are doing around you, who's just dropped their abilities, and what you should do next as a result.

There are a couple of missteps here though. The exofighter silhouettes, particularly those of Murasame and Zephyr, are too similar at a glance. As for the voice lines, there's something about the way Witchdoctor says, "Don't go breaking down!" every single time I deploy their E ability that makes me

think my teammates would rather go without being healed.

Maps are lacking in number and design. It feels like blasting through the spare parts of the Xbox 360-era *Lost Planet* games, over-familiar 'near future sci-fi dystopia' assets scattered around in a manner that hardly captures the imagination or provokes

tactical masterstrokes. Shipping containers, upturned trucks, nature reclaiming the tarmac. You know the type.

BARREN LANDS

In *Exoprimal*'s first week I played with the initially unlocked

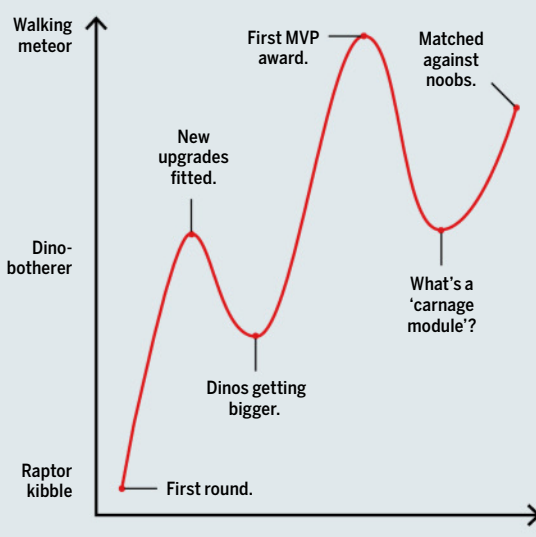
exofighters in the sole launch mode, Dino Survival. I upgraded my player, exosuit and Survivor Pass levels, upgrading both cosmetics and meaningful gameplay perks (rigs and modules as they're known) and started to feel at least a bit invested in the experience. An *Overwatch*-beater it ain't, but there's something strangely engrossing about this plot they've spent far too much time on. The drip-feed of new dino variants as you level up. The way Dino Survival mode subtly changes over time and incorporates actual story moments, culminating in an epic 'Behemoth' raid boss-style encounter.

The battle pass model doesn't get in the way. There are no obvious

The experience as a whole feels a bit sparse right now

GRIND THE GAP

The trajectory of gitting gud in *Exoprimal*



P2W mechanics lurking in the store, nor an insidious RNG slot machine keeping you from the cosmetics you want. All exosuits, for example, can simply be purchased with the in-game currency, Bikcoins. Gouging you doesn't seem to be the objective.

At least, not after already buying the game for full price. Because although the exosuits show real promise and the mode's got real tension, the experience as a whole feels a bit sparse right now. A friend who's been playing along with me over the review period has kept asking me, "Is this it?"

Yes and no. Capcom's laid out a post-launch content roadmap which includes the addition of a new mode just over a week from the time of writing this review. Savage Gauntlet, available from July 28, is built for late-game players to test their character specs on. Beyond that there's a title update in August bringing ten 'alpha exosuit variants', a new map in season two, two planned collabs with *Street Fighter 6* and *Monster Hunter*, some beta variant exosuits and a Neo-Triceratops.

I haven't played any of that yet. But based on the time I have spent with *Exoprimal* so far, I'd argue that if all that were included at launch, it still might feel a bit light for £50. It feels like a game that wants to release in Early Access and harvest all that player feedback before refining itself, but also doesn't want to sacrifice launch week revenue in the process.

So I find myself in the position of an embattled *Exoprimal* evangelist. I want this game to have a future, because like many people I'm inherently sold on mass lizard slaughter and ridiculous exosuits. But also because I'm drawn to the way Capcom drip-feeds the story, lulling you into a grind stupor then shaking up the dino warfare formula without warning. It has real impact when the tightly defined constraints of that mode are messed with.

But I've got a real PR job on my hands to get my mates signed up and on a squad with me. Because right now yes, this is it. This is the game, and it's only just enough. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

The beginnings of a PvPvE cult hit. Extinct animal slaughter is fun, but the foundations are a bit sparse.

69

COLOURFUL IMAGINATION

If it paint broke, don't fix it with **LAYERS OF FEAR**

By Lewis Parker

When the *Layers of Fear* remake was first announced, I didn't understand the need for it. The original game still looks great and it's still as scary as ever – so why bother? Especially when developer Bloober Team is already hard at work on *Silent Hill 2*. After playing through it, though, I get it. I understand why the developers felt they had to remake this, and why they felt it was important to do it now more than ever.

Layers of Fear 2023 is, confusingly, both a remake of the original 2016 release of *Layers of Fear* and the 2019 release of *Layers of Fear 2* – with both titles being completely remade in Unreal Engine 5 and smushed together into one cohesive package. The original game was greatly inspired by 2014's *PT* (the demo for the now cancelled *Silent Hills*) but has a lot more in common, gameplay-wise, with the *Amnesia* series. You'll be spending the majority of your time carefully skulking through a handful of different haunted locales, gathering clues, solving puzzles, and doing your best not to wet yourself as you're hunted by a series of monsters.

Every story focuses on a different silent protagonist, but the most important are The Painter, a man obsessed with producing the perfect portrait, and The Actor, a disgraced thespian who is hand-picked for the

starring role in a new feature film. Each tale takes you to a unique (and haunted) locale, such as an abandoned lighthouse, a dilapidated family home, and a film set on a cruise ship.

Every story focuses on a different silent protagonist

The main change that differentiates the 2023 release of *Layers of Fear* from the original two games is the introduction of an entirely new story, The Writer, which serves to tie all of the original stories present in the first two titles together. This inclusion recontextualises the first two games and makes them both a part of a larger narrative, giving the game as a whole a sort of Twilight Zone style horror anthology vibe.

Fans of the original *Layers of Fear* will find a lot of the scares have been tweaked in ways that will subvert your expectations and keep the terror fresh. There's also been specific focus on the introduction of certain accessibility options that were absent

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A remake of two psychological horror games about artists gone mad

EXPECT TO PAY

£25

DEVELOPER

Bloober Team/
Anshar Studios

PUBLISHER

Bloober Team

REVIEWED ON

Intel Core i7-7820X,
16GB RAM, Nvidia
GeForce RTX 2060
Super, and AMD Ryzen
9 5900X, 64GB RAM,
Nvidia GeForce
RTX 4080

MULTIPLAYER

No

LINK

layersoffears.com

from the first title, as well as some overall quality of life additions – such as every note and collectible having full voiced dialogue.

I played through *Layers of Fear* on two separate builds, one that was somewhat underpowered (i7-7820X, GeForce RTX 2060 SUPER, 16GB RAM) and another that was somewhat overpowered (Ryzen 9 5900X, RTX 4080, 64GB RAM). Both builds played the game at a consistent framerate, and I didn't experience a single crash throughout the entirety of my playthroughs.

I did run into a few bugs however, such as one time where I clipped myself out of bounds and some audio overlapping, but the biggest real criticism I can make of *Layers of Fear* is that some of the scares do lose their edge the longer you play, especially when you realise how little consequence death has and how generous the checkpoint system is.

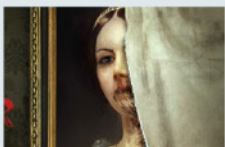
ART ATTACK

It's hard not to see the stories in *Layers of Fear* as metaphors for the remake's existence. Every story, including the new one created just for the remake, in some way deals with the themes of perfectionism and criticism of art – and remaking these titles has given Bloober Team an opportunity to show everyone how much they've improved since 2016.

Layers of Fear 2023 doesn't feel like a remake for the sake of a cash grab; it feels more like a declaration of intent. This is easily the best game Bloober Team has made yet, and its existence serves to show everyone why it believes it's the right developer to helm the *Silent Hill 2* remake – and I have to admit, with this game it has convinced me. ■

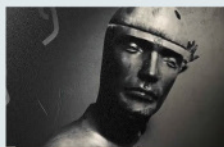
THE LAYERS OF LAYERS OF FEAR

Every story you'll play through in the collection



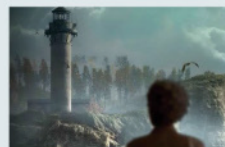
LAYERS OF FEAR

The original, and most updated part of the game (and the scariest), following The Painter.



LAYERS OF FEAR 2

The most mechanically (that's a joke, it features robots) impressive of the three, featuring The Actor.



THE WRITER

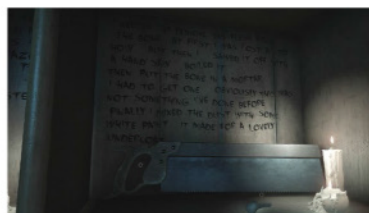
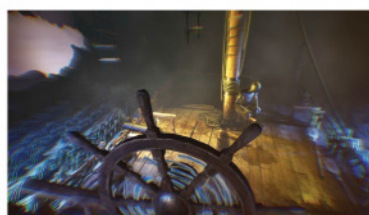
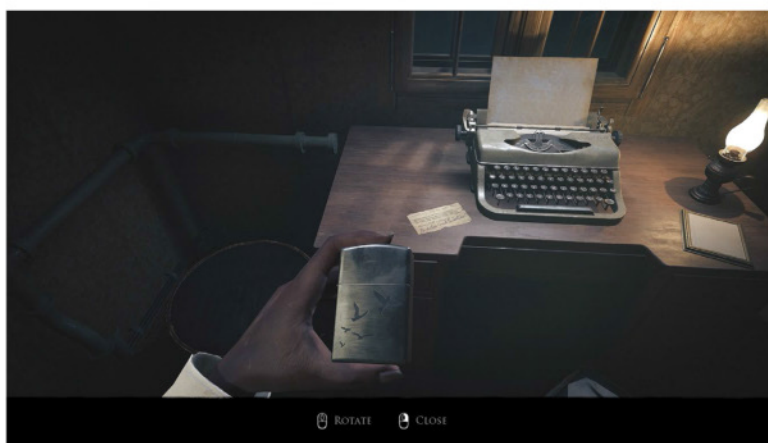
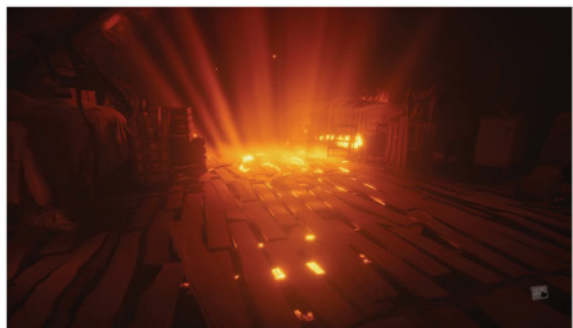
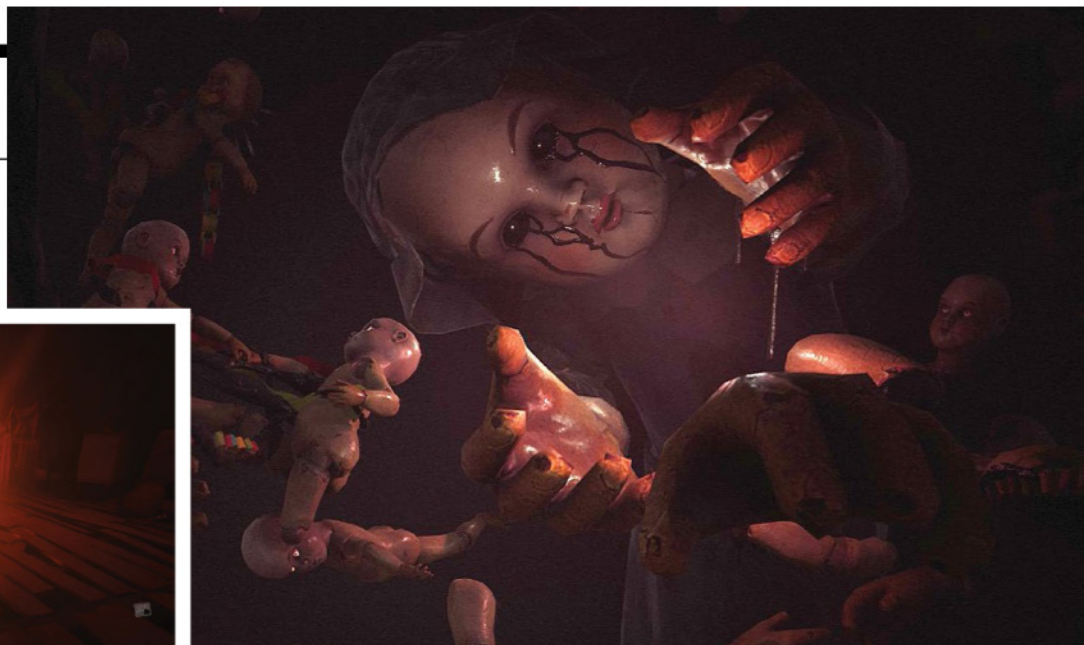
Layers of Fear's newest entry, featuring The Writer, who attempts to tie all of the stories together.

PC GAMER

VERDICT

Beautiful, horrifying and updated through Unreal Engine 5, *Layers of Fear* is easily Bloober Team's best work to date.

90



FAR LEFT: The Writer sees you take on the in-game task of chronicling the lives of the unfortunate victims of each story

LEFT: What right does a game this scary have to be this pretty?



The original, terrifying house from *The Painter* – now even scarier with the power of Unreal Engine 5 (yay!)

WORKING HARD

THE LAST WORKER starts strong, but can't carry the day

By Ted Litchfield

I went into *The Last Worker* expecting a deeply political game. Best case: something really pressing for the current moment. Worst case: a preachy polemic about this 'late capitalism' thing people are always patting themselves on the back for having noticed. I instead found a forbidden, third thing: a breezy caper with a broad anti-corporate theme, anchored by puzzle-solving gameplay centred around a six degrees of freedom hovercraft.

The Last Worker is a fun, short, narrative puzzle game, something I'm always glad to play, but not an exemplar of the genre. You assume the role of Kurt, a 25-year veteran of the Amazon-alike Jüngle corporation who, through bureaucratic oversight, has outlasted wave after wave of automation-driven layoffs to be the literal last human worker sorting packages in a Manhattan-sized fulfilment centre. As a note: this game is sold as fully playable both in and out of VR, and I only had the opportunity to review the flat-panel version before launch.

That package sorting is one of two main gameplay loops in *The Last Worker*. Using a compass projected from Kurt's hovercraft, you have to fly through the facility to your next package, check it for damage, weight discrepancies, or other errors, then deliver it to either 'recycling' or fulfilment chutes accordingly. I was very excited by this mechanic – it has the sort of 'gotcha' trolling capacity as *Papers, Please*'s bureaucratic battles, "Oh, you thought this box was fine because it was undamaged and the correct weight? You moron! You forgot to check the size!" This is a fun setup, and there are two set pieces where you have to balance secondary objectives against your basic rounds, but it never fully escalates and reaches its potential.

The Last Worker's other main gameplay pillar, some arcadey stealth in the fulfilment centre's back rooms, shows similar promise while not quite sticking the landing. My main

complaint is that I wish the hovercraft's verticality had been leveraged more. Your six degrees of freedom are well catered-to in the warehouse work portions, which make you fly up and down massive stacks of boxes to find your packages, while most of the stealth portions could be pretty easily replicated with your boots on the ground. There is one set piece where you descend

through a silo, avoiding bots' circular patrol routes at each level. This bit spoke to the spatial hovercraft sneaking, but was sadly a one-off.

This game is sold as fully playable both in and out of VR

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A first-person puzzler about the last human worker at a far-future warehouse

EXPECT TO PAY

£16

DEVELOPER

Oiffy, Wolf & Wood

PUBLISHER

Wired Productions

REVIEWED ON

Intel Core i5 12600K, 32 GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 3070

MULTIPLAYER

No

LINK

thelastworker.com

MILEAGE MAY VARY

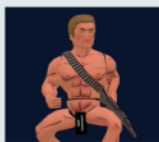
At the risk of spoiling too much, *The Last Worker* kinda does the *BioShock Infinite* thing where the rebels are actually a bunch of greedy assholes and both sides are bad. Your mileage may vary on how much of a bummer that is (I was grumbling), but overall the game's story and characters are fun and a good hang. It's more straightforward than I expected: I clocked the lone twist pretty quickly, and *The Last Worker* could be a bit too eager to explain its jokes. At one point a character mockingly intones, "How could Mr Jüngle not be progressive, he has rainbow hair!" Thanks, but I kinda picked up on the bit just seeing the coiffure in question.

Jason Isaacs' turn as your little robot buddy is a treat though, and whenever I hear the guy talk I'm reminded of his role as Soviet General Zhukov in *The Death of Stalin*, which is a huge plus for me. I'm also a fan of the holographic product previews you see after a successful delivery: almost all of them are Simpsons-esque puns and sight gags, with my favourite being a 'Grizzly Man Action Figure' featuring a wee Werner Herzog holding a tiny bear.

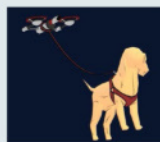
I enjoyed my time with *The Last Worker* – I think it's well-priced at £16, and it's a kind of game I'm always happy to see more of: short, contained, mechanically distinct, and backed by a big budget. At the end of the day though, it just doesn't hit the same highs as other first-person puzzlers like last year's fantastic *Scorn*, and doesn't deliver the poignancy of other, similarly overtly political games like *Disco Elysium*, *Norco*, or *Night in the Woods*. ■

SATISFACTION GUARANTEED

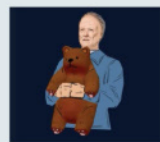
These products were my favourite part



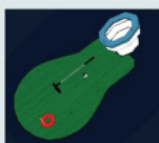
COMMANDOMAN
That's right folks, it's 2023 and we are going 'whole hog' on Commandoman.



DOGWALKER DRONE
Just a visual gag, a perfect fit for that absentee pet owner.



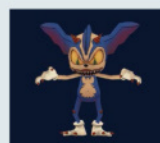
GRIZZLY MAN
My girlfriend had a teacher who was roommates with the actual Grizzly Man.



POTTY PUTTER
Hitting the links while you're hitting the Porcelain Throne.



SELFIE HANDGUN
A scathing critique of our culture of narcissism.

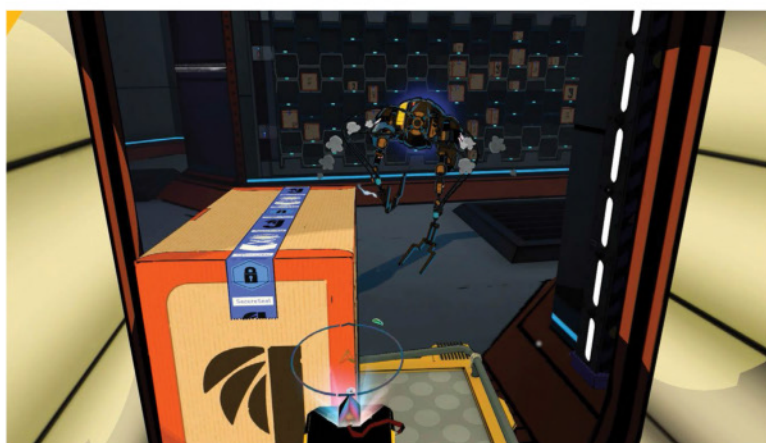
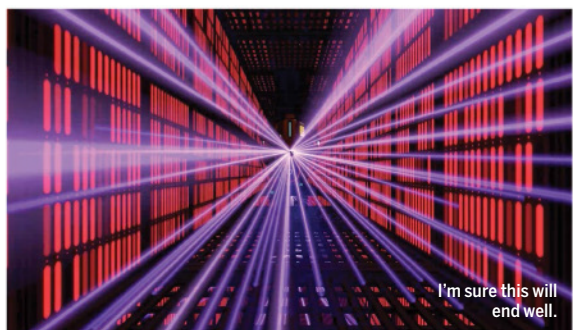


ZODICK THE HELLHOG
This is gonna be searching out the Perdition Emeralds.

PC GAMER VERDICT

The Last Worker offers some fun first-person puzzling that just needs more spice to bring it up to code, really.

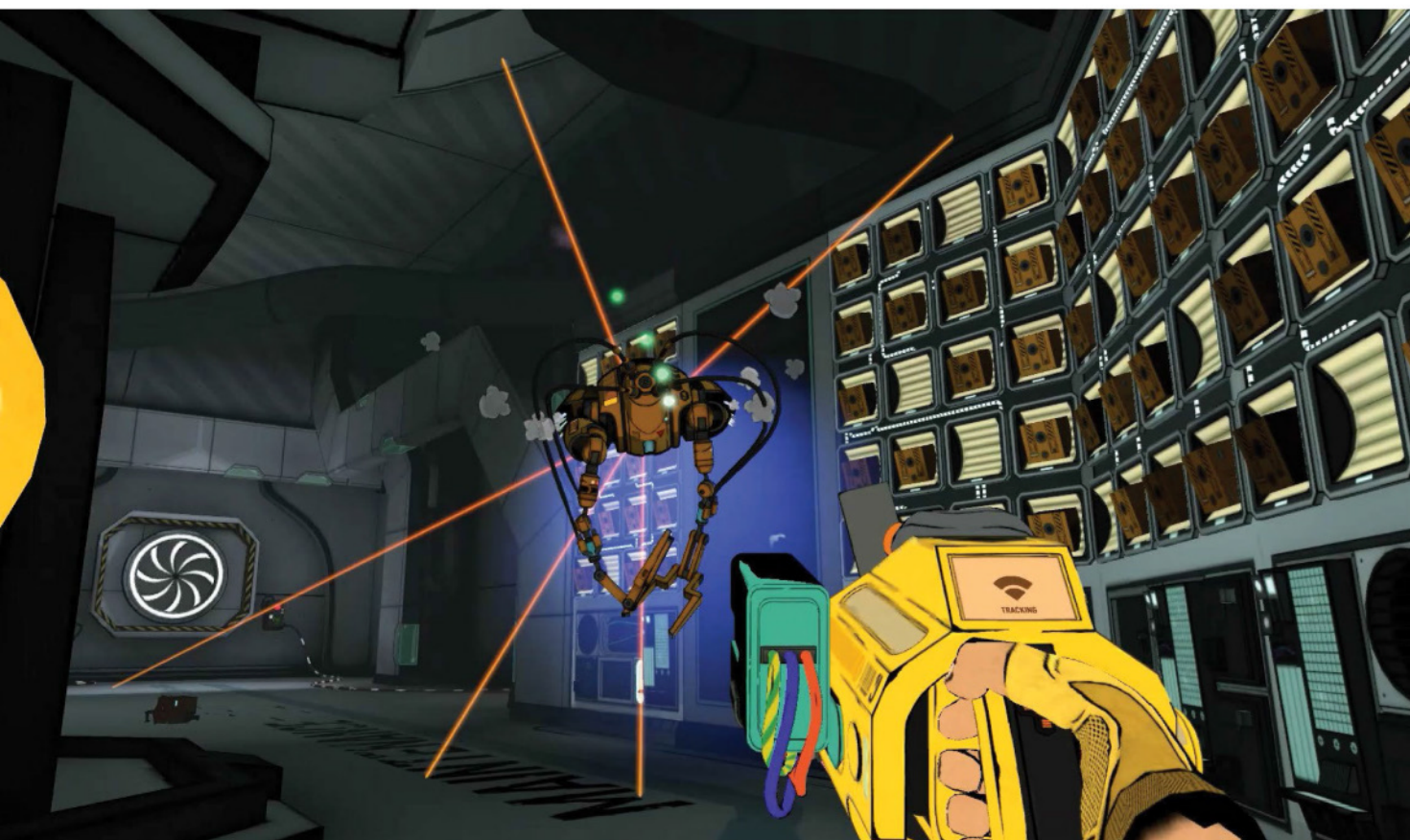
68



FAR LEFT: It's a fulfilment centre, but are you fulfilled?

LEFT: These little matching puzzles were actually pretty fun.

BELOW: I'm sure those are the good kinds of lasers you actually want to touch.



TRICK PHOTOGRAPHY

VIEWFINDER's mind-bending puzzles will change your whole perspective

By Robin Valentine

It's not often I would say a game needs to be seen to be believed. *Viewfinder* is as much a digital magic show as it is a first-person puzzle game, composed of astonishing visual and space-bending tricks you've never seen in a videogame before. The game's central gimmick is its magic camera. Take a photo of something, grab the resulting Polaroid after it satisfyingly whirrs out of the side, and then hold it up and place it in the world wherever you want.

Everything in the 2D photograph instantly becomes part of the 3D environment, drawn directly from the perspective you were looking at it from. It's mind-bending. At its simplest, that could mean taking a photo of a tower, turning it on its side, and placing it so it forms a bridge over a gap. But it quickly ramps up from there, especially once you start taking photos of the landscapes created by your other photos, allowing you to stack together bizarre, impossible structures to bypass obstacles.

Your goal in each of the game's discrete levels is always the same – reach the teleporter that takes you to the next level. It's simple, but rarely straightforward. Whether the teleporter is on the other side of an impassable chasm or stuck to the ceiling, there's always some kind of wonderful absurdity to be tackled. The first time I realised the only way to progress through a particular stage was to make a copy of the teleporter and step through that instead, was the moment I knew all bets were off in *Viewfinder's* world.

APERTURE SCIENCE

Discovering the ins and outs of *Viewfinder's* logic is very reminiscent of the first time we all learned to “think with portals” in *Portal*. It's an obvious comparison to make, but it's not one I make lightly – *Viewfinder's* tricks really do feel as revelatory to play with as *Portal's* did then.

And there's more than just one great mechanic here. The camera is

the star, but *Viewfinder* uses it as a springboard to a whole variety of reality-warping ideas. A seemingly three-dimensional doorway turns out to be a 2D image on a wall; a portal

A springboard to a whole variety of reality-warping ideas

lets you step into a totally different art-style; disconnected images on signs form a picture when viewed from the right angle, which then becomes part of the world. The strangest and cleverest twists I don't want to

spoil, because *Viewfinder's* best moments all come in two flavours: the moment you realise what new trick has just been played on you, and the eureka realisation of how you're going to get past it.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A clever puzzle game built around the ability to turn 2D pictures into 3D objects

EXPECT TO PAY
£20

DEVELOPER
Sad Owl Studios

PUBLISHER
Thunderful Publishing

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 9 5900X,
32GB RAM, Nvidia
Geforce RTX 3080

MULTIPLAYER
Yes
LINK
sos.games/viewfinder

That variety ensures there's always something new to discover in each set of levels – but at about five hours long, *Viewfinder* is a small enough game that individual ideas often don't get the time they deserve. Often I'd come out of a level thinking, “That was a great tutorial for that concept, I can't wait to see what they do with it in a proper puzzle!” Only to discover that... well, that was the proper puzzle, and the concept's never coming back.

Even the photograph mechanic, which is present in some form through almost all of the game, feels like it could stretch its wings far more. Messing about with the camera and seeing how far you can twist the environment is such a blast that I'd love to be able to really go wild with it in some kind of larger sandbox level, final set of harder challenges, or perhaps a level editor.

But if I'm complaining about *Viewfinder* not being as substantial as I wish it was, it's only because the potential here feels so big and exciting. This is the debut game from a small new developer called Sad Owl Studios. In that context, it's understandable that its Achilles' heel would be a lack of scale – and it also makes the game's triumphs all the more astonishing.

Even if *Viewfinder* struggles to fully realise the potential of its ideas, what's here is still marvellous. It's a brilliantly brain-twisting set of puzzles – but even just taken as a sight-seeing tour of what wonders this team is able to create in a digital space, it's still truly a must-play. If you love being surprised by videogames, give *Viewfinder* a try, and discover that they can still show you the world from new perspectives. ■

PHOTO FINISH

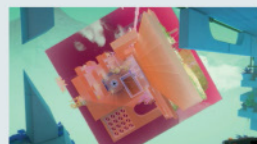
Unlockable photo filters make your adventure even stranger



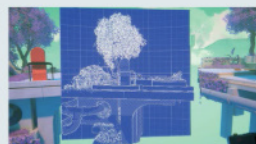
NIGHT VISION
Who cares that it's always daytime here?



RAINBOW
A splash of colour for your puzzles.



NEGATIVE
Invert the world.



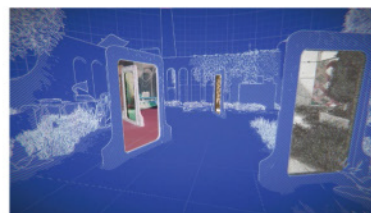
BLUEPRINT
Become a photo architect.

PC GAMER VERDICT

Innovative puzzle design and truly astonishing visual trickery make puzzle game *Viewfinder* a must-play.

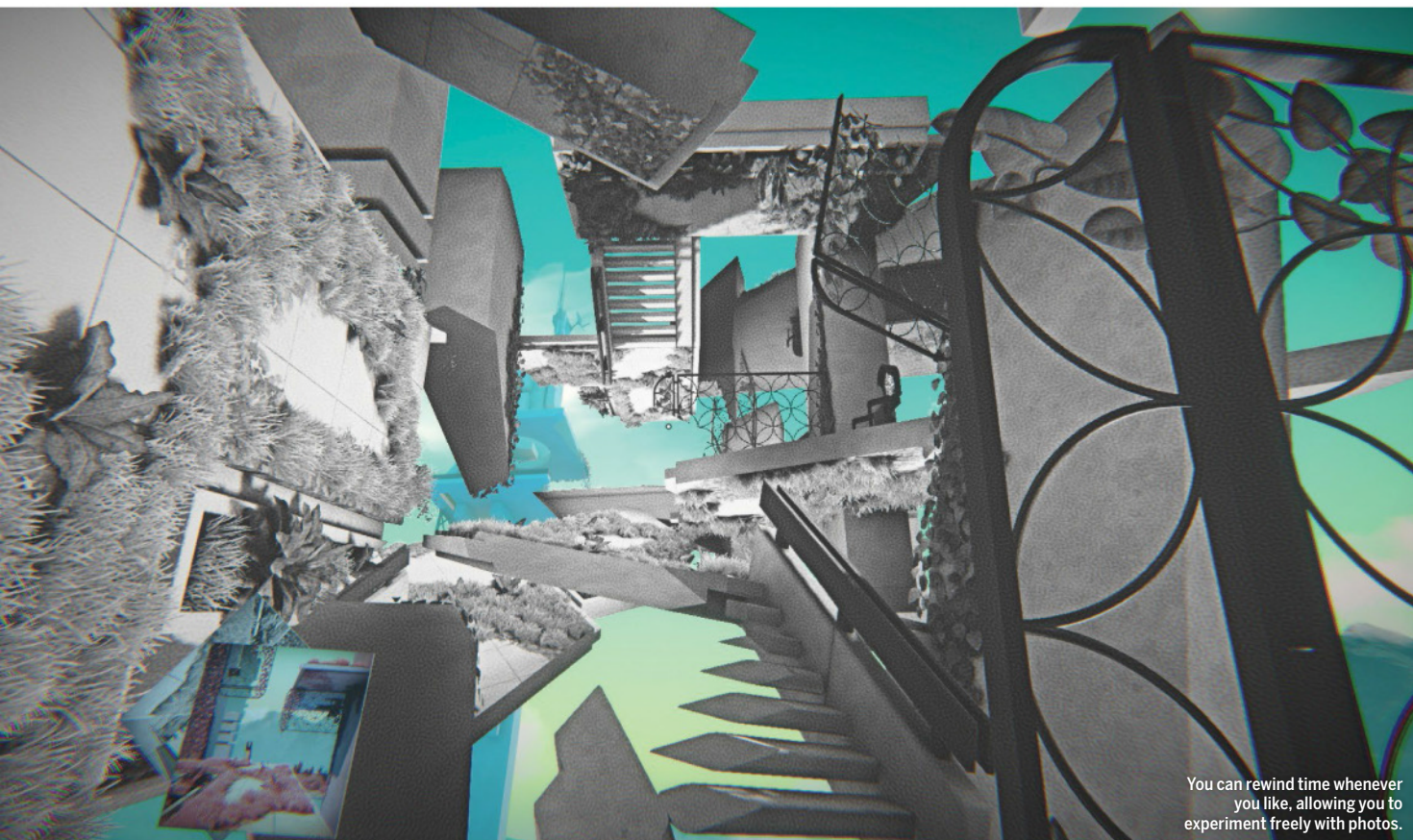
87

Magazine covers, paintings, and other 2D images you find in the world can be placed just like photos.



FAR LEFT: A Cheshire Cat-like AI serves as your occasional companion.

LEFT: The game plays with different art styles in some trippy sequences, but I wish it did more with them.



You can rewind time whenever you like, allowing you to experiment freely with photos.

DEAD CLEVER

GHOST TRICK: PHANTOM DETECTIVE is twistier than a slinky in a tornado

By Kerry Brunskill

Ghost Trick is the strangest game to ever make perfect sense. A murder mystery in the form of a puzzle game, *Ghost Trick*, from creator Shu Takumi, stars the recently deceased Sissel, who has just been told by a talking lamp he can travel four minutes into the past to prevent a young woman from getting shot by a nearsighted assassin using a mixture of bicycles, flags and old guitars – just so she can get shot again somewhere else.

Instead of the usual mystery's selection of keys to find, scrawled notes to read, and people to interrogate, you instead use ghostly powers to possess everything from umbrellas to telephones to change the lives of the unfairly doomed in the final moments before their deaths. Doing so puts you on the path to reveal the many, many secrets behind your own death.

Ghost Trick's cast-iron internal logic saves this time-twisting weirdness from descending into a supernatural mess, and it never lets me waste time examining or manipulating anything that isn't going to be useful. It's an elegant bit of puzzle design and one of those small details that makes a huge difference, because no matter

how strange *Ghost Trick* gets, I'm never left grouchy hopping from one ridiculous object to another, wondering what I'm supposed to do with a fridge and a blender.

Ghost Trick not only wants me to solve its layered onion of a mystery, it makes a real effort to cheer me on. Sissel knows exactly as much about his current situation as I do, so it always feels like we're working this whole 'suddenly being dead' thing out together. Whenever I've got ghostly company they'll enthusiastically support me as I'm on the cusp of solving another problem, transforming the placement of the final piece of each puzzle into an exciting climax. And if I make a big mistake in those final moments?

Your spectral activity always has a dash of Acme-like logic to it

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Solve a murder.
Surprise! It's yours

EXPECT TO PAY
£25

DEVELOPER
Capcom

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-10750H,
16GB RAM, Nvidia
GeForce RTX 3070

MULTIPLAYER
No
LINK
capcom-games.com/
ghosttrick

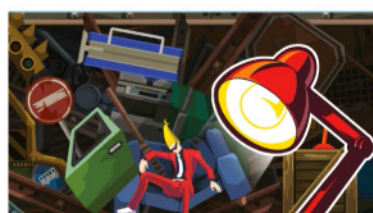
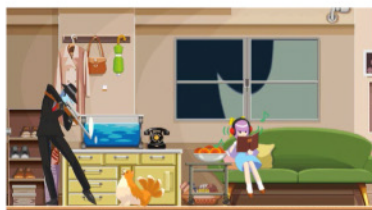
Ghost Trick doesn't mind. Sissel's ability to rewind time means screw-ups and retries are literally baked into the plot, and there's a good chance I'll learn exactly what went wrong in the process anyway.

DIE LAUGHING

This chipper attitude would normally feel out of place in a game that can't seem to go five minutes without someone being murdered, but *Ghost Trick* knows how to keep things light. Your spectral activity always has a dash of Acme-like logic to it, and before you know it you're rolling donuts around like you're the star of a Looney Tunes cartoon.

Even when I got stuck, the gorgeous, exaggerated animations kept me going. I'd never seen a lady with a wine glass glued to one perfectly manicured hand light a match on her backside, but that memory will live with me forever. Nobody in this game is capable of so much as sitting on a chair without making it look like an event.

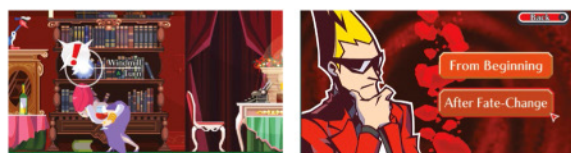
Unfortunately whatever screen resolution, windowed/windowless mode, or aspect ratio you view this goofiness in, *Ghost Trick* is always



ABOVE: Sissel is surprisingly OK with being dead.

RIGHT: You can go back over important info at any time.





TOP: Listen to the game's catchy soundtrack in the music menu.

ABOVE: Exaggerated animations make it easy to parse detailed scenes.

displayed within a 4:3 play area in a pillar-boxed window. You'll probably wonder why Capcom didn't add fullscreen 16:9 support to this HD remaster of an old DS game. It soon becomes clear, though, that every intriguing puzzle and every revelatory cutscene has been designed with this very specific field of view in mind.

Ghost Trick is so beautifully crafted I'm happy to call it art, so it's a shame that Capcom didn't include better aspect ratio support. But this is the gaming equivalent of an unmissable crime novel, a gripping mystery where every answer leads to three more questions and connects ten seemingly unrelated people or places together in a way you'd never imagined. I honestly couldn't stop until I'd seen it through to the end and when I did all I wanted to do was dive back in again, to see what more I could discover in this treasure of a tale.

My PC game library is simply better for having *Ghost Trick* in it, and I'm sure yours would be too – especially as the game's Steam Deck verified, so you can take this unforgettable adventure on the go. ■

PC GAMER **VERDICT**

Ghost Trick from Capcom is an essential and engrossing experience for any PC gamer.

92



Vegetarian options are definitely not available at the Chicken Kitchen.

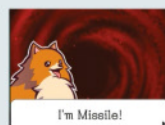
THINGS TO DO WHEN YOU'RE DEAD

Always look on the bright side of death



POSSESS THINGS

Like this ball resting on top of a ceiling fan. It's going to be a big help soon, honest.



MAKE FRIENDS

Especially with Missile. Missile's a very good boy who loves to bark. Best game dog? Best game dog.



BE NOSEY

Nobody imagines a ghost's listening in on their phone calls, after all. They're great for getting around too.



DOCTOR BOO

You can never be too late to save someone's life when you've got wibbly wobbly, timey wimey powers.

Showdown pits you against the Antichrist with a timing-based sword duel.



CHAIN GANG

You've never played a branching story quite like **CHAINGED**

The conceit of *CHAINGED* is a bold one, and it makes this PlayStation-style horror anthology stand out from the thriving PS1-aesthetic scene. It starts with Catherine and her daughter Lucy, the latter whisked away by the Antichrist during the apocalypse. After appealing to Chronos, the god of time, Catherine is given two choices where to look, and each takes the form of a new game made by a different developer.

From those two branches multiple timelines diverge, as you play through each game and come to a binary choice. Do you fight the Antichrist or Chronos? Do you save Lucy or the world? As you pick one or the other, you'll be taken to the gorgeous timeline menu, where chains spread from the games like limbs on a tree.

You'll want to play through every timeline, from those first two choices to the multiple endings, and the collection makes it easy with a feature that really all games should have. You can fast-forward to a game's ending choice, and open up a new path without having to play it again. With nearly 40 games included, it makes unlocking every ending an achievable prospect.

Occasionally po-faced, but mostly absurd and sometimes very funny

Before I get into some specific games, I want to talk about that story, which is a bonkers saga of celestial backstabbing and cosmic twists that feels like Supernatural on fast-forward. It's occasionally po-faced,

but mostly absurd and sometimes very funny.

The games are heavily story-focused, following Catherine as she searches for Lucy, and Chronos and the Antichrist as they help or hinder her. Usually, you're exploring small

worlds in first-person, but there are also a few top-down RPGs and even a trippy flying game.

TIME TO KILL

CHAINGED begins on a strong note with the hefty *Kyoto 1986*, a game about charging up a magical sword

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A collection of PS1-style games with a cleverly connected story

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
HauntedPS1

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-10750H, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 2060

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
bit.ly/chainged

and hurling yourself at deadly flying lanterns. It's one of the more gamey titles here, along with the *Starfox*-like *The Unraveling*, in which you fly into the screen, destroying obstacles and passing through hoops. Ultimately, I found that game too tough, but, like every game, it's worth a play at least.

You don't need to finish the games to unlock their ending choices, and that's why I wasn't annoyed by the occasional seemingly broken game or repetitive top-down RPG. They might be billed as separate games, but every one feels like part of the whole: just another step towards the satisfyingly climatic endings.

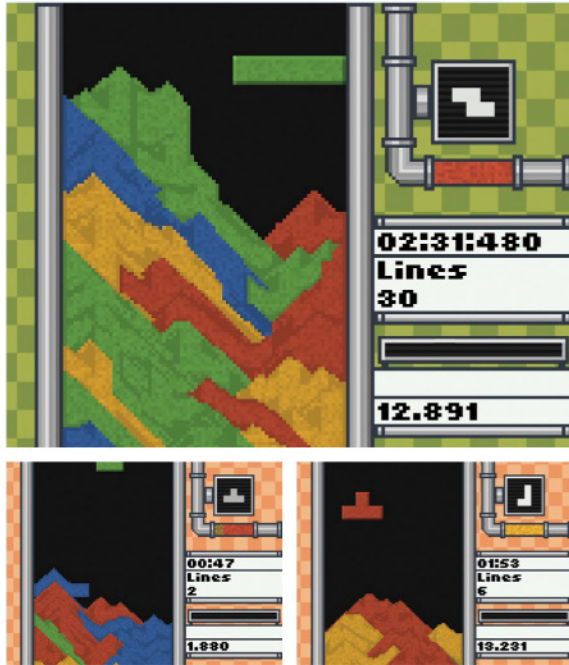
I'm thinking of *Fin*, the most overtly comedic game here and one with serious 'child playing with action figures' energy. It culminates in a short film, replete with bad wigs and fake blood, and I can't think of a better way for this joyfully crazy experiment to draw to a close. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

A tightly connected anthology that's more than the sum of its parts. This grand experiment yields fascinating results.

75

BELOW: Here I'm trying to clear 40 lines in the shortest time.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
mslivo

LINK
bit.ly/sandtrix

QUICK SAND

Tetris hits the beach in matching puzzler **SANDTRIX**

What are tetrominos made of? It's not a question I've asked before, but after *Sandtrix* it's on my mind. Can they melt? Are they hollow? How heavy are they? In *Sandtrix*, the shapes are made of sand, dissolving into particles when they hit the ground. It makes for the weirdest, most inventive *Tetris* yet.

That one key difference aside, the rules of *Tetris* remain the same. Blocks fall and you have to put them into lines, to make them disappear. Here those lines aren't neat rectangles, but hills of coloured sand – connect a colour from one edge to the other, and every touching grain of the same hue will disappear.

The physics make this a special game, as the sand will tumble down those little hills, adding another time pressure and constantly ruining your

plans. You almost had a full line of red, but three specks of green have tumbled into the gap. Brilliant, now there's an avalanche of yellow.

It's a lot harder than standard *Tetris*, as you can't just park blocks off to one side for a bit, without them trickling towards you. But when things fall into place, it's a beautiful sight. You begin to use slopes to your advantage, watching the blocks dissolve into particles and spreading their colour over a greater distance than in their initial solid form.

Having just a few pixels ruin your lines can be frustrating, and I wish there was a slower mode so I could play for longer. But this is such a strange idea that you need to play it if you have any fondness for *Tetris*. *Tetris* with sand might sound daft, but it's the most original thing to happen to the game in ages. ■

80

BANG TIDY

Sort to survive in survival horror **THE PULSE OF EVIL**

The *Pulse of Evil* is a game about stuff. Glorious weapons and ammo, which you have to cram into your inventory, by dragging and rotating them inside your allotted squares.

If I can rotate this shotgun just a little bit, I might rescue a square or two for this crossbow bolt. Ah, and I can fit more pistol ammo if I store them all horizontally. You've probably enjoyed doing that in games like *Resi 4* before, but probably not while the game carries on. *The Pulse of Evil* has you managing your inventory while in the middle of battle.

You can only carry one thing in your hands in this gloomy top-down survival horror, and to swap your weapon or refill your ammo you have to temporarily drop your weapon into your backpack. Hope you kept a space free for it. Now drag the ammo

box onto your rifle before the zombie catches up to you. It's a new and thrilling kind of tension that takes box-fiddling and makes it real-time.

What you're doing is clearing out a spooky zombie-infested mine, by traipsing from room to room in search of several fleshy pod-things. Once killed, these will open the way to the boss fight. It's all set in one large-ish level, and when something dies it's forever – including you.

Dying throws the player into a new character arriving to finish the job, although the state of the world remains as it was. Monsters stay dead, even the final boss will stay injured, and you can just plunder your previous character for a head start. This trivialises the combat, but not so much that it ruins an otherwise tense and atmospheric survival horror. ■

BELOW: Few games make their inventory their biggest feature.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Madnukin et al

LINK
bit.ly/PulseEvil

74

You better believe that lighting this match was the result of a lengthy QTE.



LETHAL DRIZZLE

The gleeful, clumsy absurdity of **HEAVY RAIN**

It's dangerous going into *Heavy Rain* with anything less than absolute sincerity. An odd thing to say, perhaps, about a game about a child-murdering serial killer. But it's also a game that lets you fail QTEs without consequence, slip over on weaponised fruits, and chop your finger off with Fisher Price safety scissors. In the wrong (mangled) hands this becomes a deeply comic game.

It doesn't help that, for a game set in the US, so many of the cast have bizarre accents, making the clumsy dialogue even trickier to navigate. But that's not the only problem. In the moments when some restraint would help elevate the story, there's a sense that not only is this a game written by someone with no knowledge of America, but of Planet Earth in general. It's like an AI-generated drawing of humanity. Madison Paige, the intrepid investigative journalist who rides a sexy motorbike, somehow ends up tied up in the basement of a man whose face screams 'I will tie you up in my basement'. FBI justice node Norman Jayden has a pair of magic glasses for solving crimes, which is so shit it's almost certainly the pitch for an '80s

cop show that wasn't just cancelled, but never made in the first place. And Ethan Mars is the human version of tofu soaked in tears. Generally, the narrative contrasts have the subtlety of a cement mixer doing karaoke. One moment you're in your perfect

Ethan Mars is the human version of tofu soaked in tears

house, QTE-spinning your favourite son on a sunny day; the next, you're microwaving bachelor slop in a world of grey piss and serving it to your remaining sprog on a formica table. It makes The Room look like

Three Colors: Red. I'm literally angry that anyone, anywhere thought this was elegant storytelling.

ORIGAMI SURPLUS

And yet, despite all this, it's still a unique and often fascinating experience. Having four characters,

however clumsy their backstories, does feel generous. And the branching storyline is more complex and rewarding than most games that offer open outcomes. There are some QTE sections where it's possible to fail every prompt and still succeed – none more hilariously obvious than Norman's chase scene through a market – but elsewhere, the wrong choices can divert the story. This sounds like a criticism, but it's not. It's exciting playing a game that's possible to complete even if things have gone very wrong. And yes, maybe there's some pleasure in knowing that you can see such unlikable characters get mangled in car crushers or drilled in the knees. It also looks incredible, 13 years after its initial console release; although the fact it uses that clarity to show us dream sequences in which a woman in her smalls is menaced by masked strangers is perhaps less inspiring. ■

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
David Cage's First
Horny Student Feature
Film: *The Game*

EXPECT TO PAY
£16

DEVELOPER
Quantic Dream

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-7700,
16 GB RAM, Nvidia
GeForce GTX 1070

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
store.steampowered.com/app/960910/Heavy_Rain

PC GAMER VERDICT

Sometimes great. We should be glad *Heavy Rain* exists, even if elements have aged like kippers on a sunbed.

68

BELOW: Everything I know about anatomy I learned from *Sniper Elite*.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
£40

DEVELOPER
Rebellion

PUBLISHER
In-house

BREEZY LOVER

Forever shooting sweetbreads in **SNIPER ELITE 4**

Perhaps games only need to do one thing really well. *Bionic Commando* has swinging. *Gears of War* has active reloading. *Sniper Elite* has the joy of perfectly judging the wind so you can shoot a Nazi through his balls.

There are even famous testicles to shoot, none more obvious or satisfying than those belonging to Hitler. Although I should use the singular, because the developers, to their eternal credit, take the saucy, secondary school approach to the Fuhrer's anatomy and commit to his monorchism; a fact that forced me to Google 'did Hitler only have one nut' before writing this. The whole experience, then, is the sort of functional, unpretentious fayre we've come to expect from British developer Rebellion, a sort of chipper, productive Dad's Army of making the

same three games over and over forever. And why not, when they're as fun to play as this? The entire experience is akin to watching catchphrase comedy. The scenarios might change each time, but we're really only here to watch bullets fly in glorious slow-motion through distant Wehrmacht livers. The loop that *Sniper Elite* offers – sneak around, take down guards, look cool while you shoot people from far away – largely hasn't changed over the course of five games, and nor would we ever want it to. You might occasionally fight a tank or fire an RPG, but there's a wholesome honesty to the game's singularity of purpose. When you're old and you attend your child's VR marriage to a charming AI, you'll look back and yearn for the glorious simplicity of *Sniper Elite*. ■

76

SNOW MERCY

Icy dead people in **RISE OF THE TOMB RAIDER**

It's 2015. The Crystal Dynamics team is having its weekly 'how can we make Lara Croft suffer?' meeting. "We already put her upside-down in a dirty bag and impaled her. What else is there?", asks one developer. "I know!", shouts another, excitedly. "Let's make the weather really shitty!" Cheers all round.

Everything I just wrote is completely made up. But it does sometimes feel, over the course of three titles, like the First Lady of Action Games has been shot, stabbed, bound, burnt and drowned. But the big difference in the second game is that Lara is at least a willing participant in the adventure. Whereas in the 2013 reboot she ended up washed ashore on Peril Island, here she's following in her father's footsteps by hunting for the Divine Source. It goes wrong

in the way you want it to, and before long you're trapped in the frozen wilderness, forced to hunt and scavenge to ensure your survival. This isn't *The Long Dark*, though. In order to make tools and weapons you need a Crafting Tool (note the capital letters), which is like thinking you can write symphonies because you have a Music Stick. There's something vaguely amusing about being able to make an improvised explosive device out of cans of alphabet spaghetti you found on the Siberian tundra. But there's an elegance to the game's systems that soon makes you forget how quickly you'd die if you had to make arrows out of discarded feathers and twigs. It's a process that remains compelling because the game looks lovely and the twang of shooting baddies with a bow never gets old. ■

BELOW: Lara doesn't see people. She sees crafting resources on legs.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
£7

DEVELOPER
Crystal Dynamics

PUBLISHER
In-house

80

Summer Savings

SIZZLING HOT SUBSCRIPTIONS



OVERSEAS
OFFERS
ALSO
AVAILABLE

PLUS OFFERS ON BINDERS, GUIDES & SPECIALS



See the entire range online at

www.magazinesdirect.com/summer23

or phone 0330 333 1113

Offer closes 30th September 2023. Offer open to new subscribers only. Direct Debit offer is available to UK subscribers only. This price is guaranteed for the first 12 months and we will notify you in advance of any price changes. Please allow up to six weeks for delivery of your first subscription issue (up to eight weeks overseas). The full subscription rate is for 12 months and includes postage and packaging. If the magazine ordered changes frequency per annum, we will honour the number of issues paid for, not the term of the subscription. For full terms and conditions, visit www.magazinesdirect.com/terms. For enquiries please call: +44 (0) 330 333 1113. Lines are open Monday-Friday 8.30 - 7pm and Saturday 10am-3pm UK Time or e-mail: help@magazinesdirect.com. Calls to 0330 numbers will be charged at no more than a national landline call, and may be included in your phone provider's call bundle.

HARDWARE

LET THE PC YOUR GAMES DESERVE



104

BUYER'S GUIDE

Build a great gaming PC no matter your budget.

94

GROUP TEST

Top new gaming mice reviewed and rated.

100

TECH REPORT

The price of PC gaming in 2023, and its expected trajectory.

102

TECH TALES

Dispatches from within the anti-RGB movement.

GROUP TEST

WIRED GAMING MICE

Shave weight for the ultimate flick shots with these wired gaming mice

By Jacob Ridley

Wired gaming mice haven't gone anywhere despite plenty of competition from their wire-free counterparts. By keeping a cable around it's possible to shave the maximum amount of weight from a mouse for rapid reactions and fast flick shots. There's also the added benefit of never having your mouse die partway through a match of *Valorant*.

If an ultra lightweight gaming mouse sounds like something you'd be interested in, for this issue of PC Gamer I've put some of today's hottest contenders against one another to see how they fare. There are some of our favourites in the mix, including the DeathAdder from Razer and Logitech's excellent G502, but also some cheaper options like Corsair's Sabre Pro. In this pile of tethered rodents there's sure to be a good fit for your desktop and budget.







DeathAdder V3

RAZER £62

Unbeatable speed

1 The DeathAdder has been a firm favourite of ours since its inception. The second version of this Since then it's been tweaked to make it lighter, faster, and more comfortable, culminating in the slightly absurd DeathAdder V3 before us today.

The DeathAdder offers a Razer Focus Pro sensor capable of up to 30,000 DPI. That's definitely an absurd trait even in the world of 4K monitors. Paired with that is the 8KHz 'HyperPolling Technology', which means this mouse sends its positional data to a PC more often than most. Most importantly, however, it tracks

wonderfully across the mouse mat. While resolutely a right-handed mouse, the DeathAdder has a moderately sized hump into a gentle slope down the left and right mouse buttons. It's the DeathAdder's excellent ergonomics that makes up most of its fundamental appeal. It absolutely bears mentioning that you can find a simple wired mouse for a lot less cash, but if you want the pinnacle for competitive gaming then the DeathAdder V3 is it.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Immensely quick
- Lovely ergonomics
- Expensive

SPECS BUTTONS: 6 / ERGONOMIC: RIGHT-HANDED / DPI: 30,000 / WEIGHT: 59G / LIGHTING: NONE

G502 X

LOGITECH £80

Ergonomic superiority

2 The Logitech G502 is yet another top pick among PC Gamer's staff. The latest version is the G502 X, which shaves some weight and improves on an already excellent shape, puts it right back into contention for 2023. While a little heavier than the Razer DeathAdder, the G502 X is hardly heavyweight at 89g. Not long ago that'd be considered an especially lightweight mouse, and the G502 X is a dream to throw around in games for it.

While weight has been saved on this model, it still retains the infinite scroll wheel we love so much, albeit a plastic version,

which doesn't feel as good.

The shape of the G502 X is its strongest feature. It retains the supremely comfortable design intended solely for right-handed mouse users we've come to expect, but the new interchangeable thumb button makes for easy adjustment to keep it bang-on the best spot for rapid-fire.

The only downside is the rather extortionate price, which like the DeathAdder V3 is as much as some wireless mice.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Impeccable ergonomics
- Interchangeable thumb buttons
- Expensive

SPECS BUTTONS: 11 / ERGONOMIC: RIGHT-HANDED / DPI: 25,600 / WEIGHT: 89G / LIGHTING: NONE



GROUP TEST

Sabre Pro Champion Series

CORSAIR £45

Barebones

3 If you're looking for, one, a cheaper mouse, or two, a back to basics mouse, the Corsair Sabre Pro is it. It has the innards of a high-end competitive gaming mouse stuffed into a rather bland, simple shell to save weight and cost. For FPS gamers, then, it's what you need and nothing more.

The headline feature of this mouse is the 'Axon Hyper-Processing', which much like Razer's HyperPolling, delivers a 8,000Hz polling rate for snappier reporting between the mouse and connected PC. The rest of the sensor's spec list is also superb for the price, rated at 18,000 DPI and sharing many

characteristics of pricier rodents. The shell of the Corsair is pretty barebones. It's simply black plastic with not an RGB LED in sight. It's a fairly claw-grip friendly shape, though it's not the worst for palm grip gamers. Either way it's a pretty standard, zero-fuss shell and not the comfiest for longer sessions. This mouse is absolutely the functional pick of the lot, and as one of the most affordable, too, that places it high in my gaming mice recommendations list.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Just the essentials
- Perfect for FPS gamers
- Not the comfiest

SPECS BUTTONS: 6 / ERGONOMIC: RIGHT-HANDED / DPI: 18,000 / WEIGHT: 69G / LIGHTING: NONE

Aerox 5

STEELSERIES £80

Light and fancy

4 SteelSeries has taken one of its leading mice, shaved it down to 66g, and still managed to stuff it full of lovely RGB lighting. This is definitely the best-looking lightweight wired mouse tested, although only if you don't mind its holey shell.

The Aerox's looks are a bit love-it or hate-it, and I personally fall into the camp of preferring a hard-shell mouse. If you don't mind, however, there's a lot more to like about the Aerox 5. For one, it's loaded with thumb buttons and they're mostly within easy access. There are five buttons in total on the side, a few easier to access than others. The mouse's

shell also looks and feels extremely well made. The Aerox 5's sensor doesn't quite match the DeathAdder, however, at 18,000 DPI you're unlikely to need anything higher even at 4K. The important thing is it's very responsive, as you would expect to see on a big brand mouse with a premium price point. Ultimately, this feels like the pick for anyone concerned with their desktop's style, whereas other gaming mice picks are cheaper, lighter, or comfier.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Lots of thumb buttons
- RGB lighting
- Perforated shell

SPECS BUTTONS: 9 / ERGONOMIC: RIGHT-HANDED / DPI: 18,000 / WEIGHT: 66G / LIGHTING: RGB REAR ZONE



**BOUNTIFUL RGB
LIGHTING TO
GLORIOUS EFFECT**



DO I NEED A MOUSE CAPABLE OF 30,000 DPI?

The truth is, you don't need to go chasing bigger and bigger DPI digits just to game. What really matters is how you like to game and what resolution you're gaming at. DPI, or more accurately CPI, is a measure of how many times a mouse checks the surface it's gliding over.

The lower the DPI, the further you have to move the mouse on your mat to move the cursor on screen. While higher DPIs are handy for screens with higher pixel counts, such as 4K. Even then we're talking under 10,000 DPI for most, otherwise you might find the cursor starts flying off all directions for the smallest of mouse movements. Some gamers like a twitchy response for rapid 360° no-scopes, and that's why it's good to have options, but generally we all get by for gaming with DPI settings in the low ranges, around 200-3000.

Kone XP

ROCCAT £70

Light it up

5 In a world of lightweight wired gaming mice, the Roccat Kone XP stands out for its 104g weight. That's actually not that heavy in the grand scheme of things, but considering the 59g mouse in this test it's practically a welterweight class device. Not to worry, however, it makes up for that weight with bountiful RGB lighting to glorious effect.

Its weight is not a massive detriment to the Kone XP. Some of that can be attributed to the wealth of buttons lining the side of this mouse. Most within easy reach of your mitts while gaming with it. Roccat also offers Easy-Shift here, which is the

company's way of saying it has a shift key built-in for doubled finger functionality.

Though it must be said if you're looking at this mouse, you're probably doing so with an eye for making your desktop look good. This mouse is loaded with RGB lights, and its translucent plastic shell is clear enough to let these shine through all the way to the tips of the main buttons. For looks, then, this is probably the way to go, so long as you don't care for the added weight.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- RGB everywhere
- Lots of buttons
- Heavier than most

SPECS **BUTTONS:** 15 / **ERGONOMIC:** RIGHT-HANDED / **DPI:** 19,000 / **WEIGHT:** 104G / **LIGHTING:** RGB ZONES

Lift

NZXT £50

Tough sell

6 The NZXT Lift is a mouse we've had around the PC Gamer office for a while. We've not talked about it much, and mostly that's because it's a pretty standard device by most metrics. Beyond a few fun colour combos, it feels relatively run-of-the-mill in a competitive field.

The one standout thing about it is the RGB placement, which has been cleverly fitted around the front base of the mouse. It's clever because, unlike most mice which load RGB lighting right where your palm rests when using the mouse, you can actually see the NZXT's when using it.

Beyond that, there are a few simple thumb buttons, a knobbed scroll wheel, and a fairly standard design. It's not that the NZXT does much wrong so much as it's just not as technically competent as a simple mouse like the Corsair Sabre, and it's not as lightweight or flashy as those more expensive we've tested. It's another simple FPS-style mouse with a touch of flair, and it comes in a few neat colours, but I think I'd go with a few other options before buying this one.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Clever RGB placement
- Lightweight
- Doesn't stand out

SPECS **BUTTONS:** 6 / **ERGONOMIC:** RIGHT-HANDED / **DPI:** 16,000 / **WEIGHT:** 67G / **LIGHTING:** RGB ZONES



Four years old now, the GTX 1650's still the average Steam user's graphics card.

RISING STEAM

How much would an average Steam user's PC cost, if you bought the parts in 2023?

Back in June, the Bank of England raised its interest rates to a nice round five percent. It's a single number that tells a much wider story about the impact of Covid and Brexit on our economy. Often what we read in the news feels worrying in some abstract form – it's simply a loop that we can't close, some unwelcome chaos that's sufficiently distant from our observable world that it's gone again by the time we put our phone away. But this isn't that.

Our country's economic health affects just about everything in our observable world: the price of boiling the kettle while we check the news on our phone. The monthly tariff of the phone contract. The price of the tea bags. And – thank you for bearing with me for this long while I get this thing touched down on the runway – the price of PC gaming. Which is the real kicker, obviously. We're all aware of and sensitive to those who are most vulnerable to economic fluctuations, but it's human nature that we notice national-scale phenomena like this most acutely when it starts to affect our leisure time. And from £79.99 standard editions on Steam to graphics cards that offer 35-year mortgage plans, the economic impact of our recent history has most certainly affected our shared interest.

With thoughts like this in my mind, I visited Steam's latest user hardware survey to see what it might reveal about the present situation. Valve's storefront and game library platform pulls system data from all consenting users periodically and releases a handy little report that shows what hardware specs everyone's actually using at the moment. Obviously it isn't limited to the UK, so we can't extrapolate the impact of the BoE's interest raise hike on Steam's survey, but neither is the economic situation of 2023 localised to British shores. We're all in it, everyone with a Steam account.

BRAVELY DEFAULT

The story the survey numbers tell is that of slow adoption. And to be fair the average specs are always a bit lower than we might imagine – that's the nature of taking an average from a global userbase. But had GPU prices not skyrocketed thanks to crypto mining, scarcity and Nvidia's ultra-aggressive new-gen pricing, perhaps we'd have a newer card than the GTX 1650 occupying top spot. 5.85% of all participating Steam users are gaming on Nvidia's 2019 Turing card, which came with a \$149/£149 MSRP four years ago and offered roughly equivalent performance at 1080p to the venerable GTX 970. If you bought a brand new one today, four years after release, it'd set you back £160.



Red vs Blue

One of the most compelling stats on any Steam hardware survey is the Intel-AMD market share split in the GPU categories. It's PC gaming's long-running soap opera, and for the last 17 years it's been a real underdog story. In Q1 2006, the rival chipset giants had a roughly even split of the market.



FAR LEFT: Steam's hardware survey offers a unique chance to observe the industry on a macro scale.

LEFT: Nvidia certainly did its bit to make PC gaming prohibitively expensive lately.

SPEC SAVERS *Four PC games you can easily run on Steam's average PC*



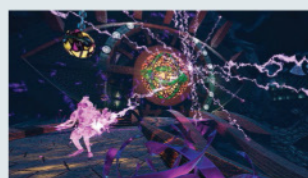
CS:GO

The only competitive shooter you'll ever need. Some might even consider 1080p to be overkill.



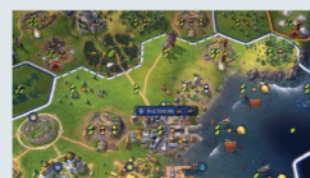
STARDEW VALLEY

Still 30th on Steam's charts, and it's there for a reason. It's deep as the ocean and it runs on a hearing aid.



AMID EVIL

And not just this one retro shooter, but the boomer shooter genre that leverages '90s-style visuals to great effect.



CIVILIZATION IV

You don't need a liquid-cooled monster build to hear Sean Bean quoting Goethe. Plus, it chugs on even quick PCs.

Onto CPUs. The hardware survey doesn't give us an exact model that more users have installed than any other, but we can do some detective work with the specs that are available. Intel's 67% market share holds firm, and the dominant model among the average steam user has six cores and is clocked at 2.3-2.69GHz. Clock speeds are a bit of a grey area here – does that refer to normal or turbo frequency? – but it's still enough to narrow down the field.

We can discount all Core i9s, and all six-core i7s have been clocked higher than 2.3GHz. So we're looking at an i5 – probably the 12400F released in early 2022 with an MSRP of \$184-\$194/£158. Our own CPU whisperer Dave James called it the Q6600 of its generation in his review (IYKYK). But the years have been kind to it in both performance and price – not only is it still a workhorse, its brand new price has decreased slightly in 2023 to £140. So far, we're exactly £300 deep.

Windows 10 64-bit still holds the OS top spot despite a push from Win11 lately, and here's where our calculations get tricky. Microsoft's MSRP was £189 at release, but few people actually paid it because they offered a free upgrade to Windows 7 or 8.1 licence holders. In either case, the cost of Win 10 has decreased – the free upgrade offer still stands, and a new key will set you back around £140 in 2023 money.

TRADITIONAL VALUES

Delving deeper, 1080p is still the dominant native resolution, 75 years after HD monitors were first introduced. We just don't upgrade our monitors that often, do we? And you can forget about 4K, that user base is miniscule. 2560x1440 is the

next most popular with 12% of users opting for sharper than HD, but the message is clear: to complete this build we need a 1080p panel, 16GB of DDR3 memory and 1TB of storage.

The price trajectory of monitors has been one of the most encouraging across all PC hardware. Samsung's 24-inch, 1080p, 60Hz LC24F390FHNXZA saw a high of almost £190 in late 2020 amid the biggest supply chain worries, and it's available for under £100 now. If you're not fussy about r/w speeds or RGB, you can pick up both the storage and RAM for a combined £60.

Which means the average Steam hardware survey PC can be assembled for, all in, around £1,000 once you factor in peripherals, PSU, mobo, cooling and a case. A lot more than a console, certainly, but given the steep rise in game prices themselves, it's a glimmer of sunshine.

DIFFERENT SIDES

There are two ways to look at it though, of course. While it's inarguably a good thing that PC gaming remains at least vaguely affordable to newcomers who don't have a hardware platform to upgrade, that has a knock-on for developers, who have to consider a widening gamut of PC specs, making high-end PC users feel like they're seeing higher fidelity levels while achieving a nice low minimum spec. And this, in turn, leads to issues of compatibility and in-game performance, as well as the ability to push boundaries by adopting fancy new next-gen graphical techniques. Times aren't easy, then – but at least the hardware entry ticket to PC gaming hasn't become unattainable. ■

Phil Iwanik

WINDOWS 10 64-BIT STILL HOLDS THE OS TOP SPOT DESPITE A PUSH FROM WIN11

LIGHTS OUT

Dispatches from within the **ANTI-RGB** movement

So the legend goes, we have bad software to thank for the RGB revolution. When Corsair brought the first mechanical keyboard with individual RGB-backlit keys to market in 2014, its intention was to empower us with the ability to customise our layout in a manner that made sense for our games. I remember keyboards prior to this that differed in backlighting between WASD keys and the rest of the board, so that you could orient yourself for shooters at a moment's glance.

By making the whole keyboard customisable, the idea was that we could backlight certain keys in a more specific manner, colour-coding our MMO macros, RTS shortcuts and MOBA layouts. The thing is, it was actually quite tricky to do that, and to save those layouts as easily swappable layouts that we could load up for each game. So we just... didn't. We let that retina-melting rainbow RGB scheme that appears by default run riot. It was only ever intended to signal, "Hey! This thing's got RGB backlit keys all over the board, look!" Instead it became the blueprint for how all of PC gaming culture would look for the next decade.

That's just how fashion works sometimes. Were it not for our collective inability to visit hairdressers during 2020 and subsequent array of self-administered haircuts, would mullets and Zoomer perms have still have become vogue? Seems unlikely. Random chance and happy accident are two of the greatest designers who ever lived.

But there was more to RGB's rise. From the first time we all saw those Corsair boards, we recognised that this was where PC gaming seemed to have been heading for a while already. Now that it had arrived, it was an easy way for PC hardware marketers to convey additional value, and to deepen the consumer's bond with their product. It comes with lights now! Your old one doesn't have lights, does it? Oh,

it does? Well can you set those lights with 16,777,216 colours? Well then: you need this new thing. And being able to customise a product, that's catnip for us. PC gaming's always had parallels with tuner cultures from the automotive world, so showing us twinkly lights that we could use to fashion a whole colour scheme was a masterstroke.

The moment we lost the war with RGB was probably when it started turning up on headsets as a matter of course. Headsets, which we wear on our heads, and therefore aren't visible to us while we're wearing them. If

you're a streamer with an aesthetic to uphold, then fine: light up your ears. Otherwise: what are we all doing?

Personally, I always felt a bit infantilised by all the twinkly lights. I wasn't immune to RGB's hypnotic quality, but when I looked down at my own hands during evening gaming sessions and saw what looked like an aerial shot of Blackpool, I felt that this

trend perhaps wasn't for me. But it wasn't until 2020 that I noticed a real rebellion forming. RGB microphones like Razer's Seiren and Thermaltake's \$1,200 RGB desk were met with as many stern looks as outstretched fists of money. The anti-RGB movement had started.

MICHAEL IRONSIDE

Some system builders pounced on it. Ironside Computers, who ordinarily make PC builds that even the most RGB-sceptic gamer would fawn over, recognised the appetite for blackout builds and thus released the 'Nightfall', their 'coal mine PC' in all-black (including black cooling liquid) and only the subtlest of white fan lights mounted on its top, just to show you how black the rest of it is.

The anti-RGB gamer's other great ally is the competitive player. As manufacturers buddied up to esports athletes for the marketing optics – 'designed by the pros' – what they found was that top-level competitive players absolutely don't want flashing lights all over their setup. SteelSeries took

PERSONALLY, I ALWAYS FELT A BIT INFANTILISED BY ALL THE TWINKLY LIGHTS



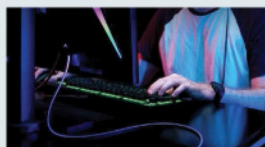
PHIL IWANIUK
Veteran contributor Phil Iwaniuk is currently locked in fierce debate with the DVLA about the 'blackout' indicator lights he's installed on his car. His assertion that 'they look wicked' holds little traction with them.

DYING LIGHT *Four applications of RGB that went too far*



RGB DESKS

Don't you hate it when you're deep into your game at night, and in the low light conditions you completely lose track of where your entire desk is? Well do I ever have the solution for you.



RGB HDMI CABLES

I don't have a funny joke for this one. Companies designed and manufactured HDMI leads with RGB lighting on them, and I really don't need to say anything more about it.



RGB MICS

Microphones capture soundwave vibrations and convert that magnetic energy to electrical signals which can be recorded. Nowhere in that description does an RGB emoji feature.



RGB GAMING CHAIRS

Chairs. Seats, that you sit in. One of humankind's oldest inventions, dating back about 6,000 years. Nobody thought to attach lights to them in all that time, but time makes a fool of us all.



How much is too much?
Some say we passed that
mark years ago.

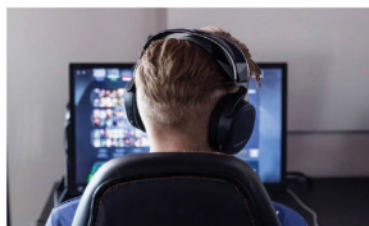
those lessons to heart most effectively, carrying over design pointers from the mice it designed in collaboration with pros to the company's broader offering. In such a manner, the mighty Arctis 7s were born.

The blackout rebellion has since gained important territory back across headsets of all major manufacturers, and mice as well as mechanical gaming keyboards have dialled down the illuminations in recent years, too. SteelSeries has held firm on its lights out approach, and while Razer can't help but throw in some glowing zones they're less overt than they once were. Logitech carries over the competitive player's preference for non-RGB designs with the G Pro mouse, and you can see its influence on the latest G502s, too.

The genie won't go back in the bottle now, and we'll probably be sitting in gently oscillating lighting arrays for years yet. Importantly, though, vendors have listened to us once we got fatigued by RGB. By and large, it's used sparingly, sensibly, and in applications where it actually adds useability now. So thanks, Corsair Vengeance K70. I guess. ■

Phil Iwaniuk

RIGHT: Even at the height of the trend, some of PC gaming's best products were RGB-free.



BELOW: Corsair's K70 from 2014, the godfather of RGB lighting. It's actually aged nicely.



YOUR NEXT PC

BUYER'S GUIDE

Build the best PC for your budget



KEY

Budget build

PC gaming is for everyone. Pick these parts if you want to build a new, well-rounded PC for a good price.

Mid-range build

You want to run every new game at 1080p 60fps. This recommended build will see you through.

Advanced build

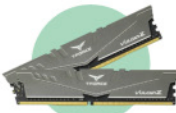
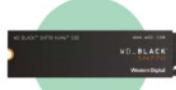
You're looking for the best PC on the market and superior components. But you still want to spend smart.

BUDGET BUILD

Enjoy 1080p gaming without breaking the bank



TOTAL
£1,058

MOTHERBOARD		B660M Pro RS ASRock £115 This is as cheap as we want to go while still offering room for expansion and upgrades down the line.
PROCESSOR		Core i5 13400F Intel £210 Intel's added four more cores to its entry-level Core i5 and it's become even more fantastic value.
GRAPHICS CARD		GeForce RTX 4060 Nvidia £315 The cheapest way to score Nvidia's latest gaming architecture and DLSS 3 support.
COOLER		Laminar RM1 (included with CPU) Intel Free There's room for an upgrade here, but on a budget the included CPU cooler will work just fine.
MEMORY		T-Force Vulkan Z 16GB Teamgroup £45 Goodbye 8GB, hello 16GB of speedy DDR4-3200.
POWER SUPPLY		Pylon 450 XPG £45 With an RX 6600 in tow we can get away with a 450W PSU, and the Pylon is just that.
SSD		WD Black SN770 500GB Western Digital £38 It's finally time to ditch SATA and go for an NVMe drive even in a budget machine such as this.
HDD		WD Blue 1TB 7200rpm Western Digital £38 You don't need a HDD, so feel free to cut this to save cash, but one sure helps if you're a virtual hoarder.
CASE		Zauron Aerocool £32 This Aerocool case will let your components breathe and has space for further expansion and cooling.
DISPLAY		GW2280 BenQ £105 A 1080p60 VA monitor will see you through in style and, once you upgrade, will make a superb second monitor.
KEYBOARD		G213 Logitech £40 It may be a membrane switch board, but it's stylish and well-built. Sometimes that's worth more than cheap clicky switches.
MOUSE		G102 Logitech £35 A classic shape delivered in a sleek shell, this mouse fits all hand sizes and grips. A solid option for the money.
HEADSET		HS55 Stereo Corsair £40 Corsair's budget cans are comfy and have a surprisingly excellent microphone for the money.

MID-RANGE BUILD

Our recommended build for playing the latest games



TOTAL
£1,618

MOTHERBOARD		B660M Mortar WiFi MSI £180 This MSI board delivers everything we need in a compact package and allows us to use much cheaper DDR4 memory.
PROCESSOR		Core i5 13400F Intel £210 Yes, this is the same CPU as the budget build. It's simply too good value to miss and perfect for high fps gaming.
GRAPHICS CARD		RTX 4060 Ti Nvidia £369 We wish this card had a bit more oomph. It is, however, still the card to buy at this price point.
COOLER		Laminar RM1 (included with CPU) Intel £Free Intel bundles a redesigned CPU cooler with some 13th Gen processors. This little chip chiller will serve us well for a while
MEMORY		Vengeance LPX 16GB DDR4-3200 Corsair £45 With plenty of capacity at 16GB, this unembellished memory has everything you need for gaming and more.
POWER SUPPLY		CX650M Corsair £93 The heart of your gaming PC is your PSU, and this 650W Corsair promises to keep your rig ticking nicely.
SSD		WD Black SN770 1TB Western Digital £70 There are faster PCIe 4.0 drives, but this is the best value for money SSD around.
HDD		WD Blue 1TB 7200rpm Western Digital £38 Just like in the budget build, this HDD isn't strictly necessary, but for a pretty low price it's nice to have plenty of extra space.
CASE		H7 NZXT £120 It's very clever of NZXT to design such an easy PC case to build into, and make it look so gorgeous too.
DISPLAY		S2722DGM Dell £260 With a snappy 165Hz refresh rate and a 1440p resolution, this Dell is an enviable blend of monitor performance.
KEYBOARD		Alloy FPS HyperX £80 As the name suggests, this keyboard is built like an absolute tank, with a steel frame and Cherry MX switches.
MOUSE		Model O- Glorious £59 Lightweight and responsive, the Model O- has made a name for itself among streamers and pros thanks to its clever design.
HEADSET		Blackshark V2 Razer £94 The Blackshark V2 offers up some killer audio quality to rival the greats. And at a reasonable price too.

ADVANCED BUILD

Go above and beyond with a PC powerful enough to end worlds



TOTAL
£5,275

MOTHERBOARD		MPG Z790 Carbon WiFi MSI £483 This MSI motherboard brings the latest chipset to bear without going overboard on excessive features.
PROCESSOR		Core i9 13900K Intel £589 This is the best all-round processor money can buy. It's a little overkill, but that's what this build is all about.
GRAPHICS CARD		GeForce RTX 4090 Founders Ed Nvidia £1,699 The RTX 4090 is immense, in every way. The performance it offers is unmatched by any GPU out there.
COOLER		Kraken X63 NZXT £123 One of the most stunning AIO coolers rebuilt with an updated pump, LGA 1700 bracket, and RGB lighting for more pizzazz.
MEMORY		Trident Z5 RGB G.Skill £188 This is a new memory standard for a new era of memory speed. DDR5 is blisteringly and fantastically quick.
POWER SUPPLY		Prime TX-1000 Seasonic £340 An ATX 3.0 PSU would also be good here, but we've tested this Seasonic and know it's worthy of such a build.
BOOT DRIVE		WD Black SN850X 2TB Western Digital £167 WD makes a mean PCIe 4.0 SSD, and the SN850X is its best to date.
DATA DRIVE		Crucial P5 Plus 2TB Crucial £177 This isn't as fast as our boot drive, but it'll more than suffice for storing heaps of games.
CASE		5000D Corsair £155 We swear this stylish mid-tower is bigger on the inside. It's the PC equivalent of the TARDIS.
DISPLAY		34 QD-OLED (AW3423DWF) Alienware £929 You could be much more sensible on your screen than this. For this build, however, we only want the best.
KEYBOARD		G915 Lightspeed Logitech £185 Low-profile mechanical switches are just the icing on the cake that is the superb, wireless Logitech G915.
MOUSE		G502 Lightspeed Logitech £110 With a lengthy battery life and a phenomenal sensor to keep you gaming at your best, the G502 is undoubtedly one of the finest.
HEADSET		Arctis 7 Wireless SteelSeries £130 If you've settled on a wireless keyboard and mouse, the last thing you want is a pesky cable to your headset.

EXTRA+LIFE

CONTINUED ADVENTURES IN GAMING



“My opponent gave the One Ring to an undead mosquito”

Netdecks and Middle-earth cards keep things interesting in **MAGIC: THE GATHERING ARENA**

I'm a card game dilettante, meandering from table to table whenever I get bored. I've bounced between *Hearthstone*, *Gwent*, *The Elder Scrolls: Legends*, *Horus Heresy: Legions* and so many others. The worst thing they can do is offer a daily login reward. I'll dutifully collect the freebie every 24 hours until the game becomes a chore I uninstall out of spite.

Magic: The Gathering Arena doesn't have a daily login reward, because it doesn't need to. It's *Magic: The bloody Gathering*. It makes money hand over fist whether we play it or not. Some of the cards are more valuable than gems. People should wear them as jewellery, propose marriage with a foil copy of Sol Ring. That means there's a refreshing lack of neediness

JODY MACGREGOR



THIS MONTH
White weenies for the win.

ALSO PLAYED
Deadeye Deepfake
Simulacrum, *Blood Bowl 3*

in *Arena*. It recently came to Steam, four years after leaving beta, with zero fanfare. The new player experience was revamped too, with a beginner mode called Starter Deck Duel where everyone plays with preconstructed decks they keep. You'd barely know it existed unless you pay attention to the events menu.

The obscene popularity of *Magic* also makes being a filthy netdecker easy. The tier lists on Untapped.gg are effective because they're based on a huge mass of player data, though I tweak them both to suit my playstyle

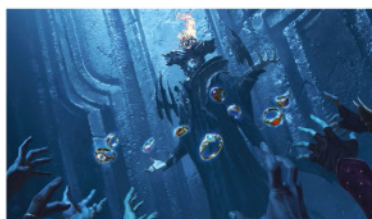
and gaps in my collection. I've been playing Azorius Soldiers, a white/blue deck that floods the virtual tabletop with weak creatures white decks specialise in.

If my opponent puts together a decent defence against this overwhelming horde of rinky-dink tin soldiers I play Harbin, Vanguard Aviator, who gives them all the ability to fly and +1 when attacking, then send them over the top like it's World War I, only I've got jetpacks.

MY PRECIOUS

The other thing about *Arena* is that normally the crossover sets with

**I PAIRED THE WHIMSICAL
'HOBBIT' AND 'BREAKFAST'
THEMES TO MAKE A DECK**



Every ten boosters you get a free golden pack of rares.

characters from The Walking Dead or Warhammer 40,000 or whatever only appear as cosmetics. Tales of Middle-earth has been an exception, though its Lord of the Rings cards aren't playable in the Standard mode.

Magic has a proliferation of formats because the audience is so big they can afford to slice it into niches. Tales of Middle-earth is legal in Historic, Alchemy and various limited-duration events.

I've been playing it in the Jump In event, which is like Starter Deck Duel only instead of choosing a preconstructed deck you make one by picking two themed halves to slap together. I paired the whimsical 'Hobbit' and 'breakfast' themes to make a deck that produced food tokens for healing, and to power up Bill the Pony when I fed him.

Playing cards with characters as recognisable as Frodo Baggins gives *Magic* a secondhand thrill it can't achieve with the likes of Harbin, Vanguard Aviator. At the same time, combining cards from two settings makes for some oddities, like the time my opponent gave the One Ring to an undead mosquito.

The crossover's kept things fresh, though. I probably won't bounce over to another table for a while yet. ■



Guess our party better do some adventuring I suppose.

"The Sword Coast wizzes all over that"

Adventuring in **BALDUR'S GATE: ENHANCED EDITION**

▶ ROBERT JONES



THIS MONTH
Butt kicking for goodness!

ALSO PLAYED
Diablo IV, XCOM 2

Baldur's Gate offers plenty of questing and adventuring, all set against an epic, battle-for-godly-power main story but, being honest, as I tour around the Western Heartlands with my bunch of merry men (and women), I think I'd just prefer to settle down here by this stream and have a picnic as, my god, how idyllic is the Sword Coast?

Honestly, think of the most beautiful patch of countryside/coast you've ever been to. OK, got it in your mind? Well, the Sword Coast wizzes all over that, with lush verdant forests and woods, azure seas, meandering rivers, green pastures and rolling hills, rugged cliffs, and picture-postcard towns and villages in abundance. Simply put, it's the perfect location for a cheeky last-minute mini-break.

My ranger barbarian friend Minsc is itching for some sword-on-sword action and heroic deeds, desperate for us to go and kick some bandit butt, but why bother with all of that hassle when I can have a nice walk down this bucolic river, admiring nature as I go, tour some pretty ruins from ages past, then return back to

town for a slap-up meal and a sleep in a soft bed at Beregost's Feldepost's Inn? I know what I would choose.

GNOLL DICE

Unfortunately, despite my penchant for lazily wandering around the countryside surrounding the city of Baldur's Gate, the more devious denizens of Faerûn have other ideas. As I tour the lands southwest of the fortress library of Candlekeep, Gnolls suddenly attack, disrupting my idyllic walkabout.

And, what's more, I soon see the gnolls are coming from a castle fort they've overrun and made their home. That's a damn shame, too, as it looks like the sort of place I'd like to picnic in while I admire the landscape. Roused for the greater good of protecting my ability to go walkabout and luncheon in peace, my party and I storm the stronghold and cave in the skulls of the gnolls and kobolds we find there. If that heroic butt-kicking didn't please Minsc enough, we also find and rescue his former companion Dynaheir, too.

Gazing out from the liberated fortress ramparts, I then muse if the Sword Coast has a National Trust I could join. ■



“I’ve never seen such anatomically irresponsible character creation”

The **STREET FIGHTER 6** character creator leads to some strange sights

Something doesn’t feel right about my dumb ass meeting Chun-Li. Backing up: I’ve started making crude versions of myself whenever I’m confronted with a character creator. I didn’t used to do that. I used to make characters who looked cool, or at least had more hair. Maybe I’ve gotten more comfortable with my body, or just creatively lazy.

Street Fighter 6’s story mode, where you wander around a city challenging pedestrians to fights, includes a senselessly granular character creator. Positioning the moles that sit on either side of my torso felt like some kind of pre-screening task I’d do at a dermatologist’s office. You can separately adjust the size of every muscle group, creating entirely new ways to be ripped or buff or not. I’ve never seen such anatomically irresponsible character creation.

Ironically, the more flexible a character creator is, the more dismayed I am by its limitations. There are 96 facial scar options, but none that look like the scar under my

▶ TYLER WILDE



THIS MONTH
Made himself in *Street Fighter*, which was a mistake.

ALSO PLAYED
Dave the Diver

right eye that I got from accidentally running into my friend Dave and smacking my face into the laser-tag gun he was holding, then bleeding all over the laser-tag place, not as a child but in my 20s, and not my early 20s: I was around 26 or 27, I think, an adult by any measure. What gives?

Where once I only cared about coolness, ever since I started making myself in character creators, I’ve increasingly felt obligated to be honest, as if someone’s going to judge me for giving myself strong, thick wrists instead of the brittle bundles of pipe cleaners my actual hands are

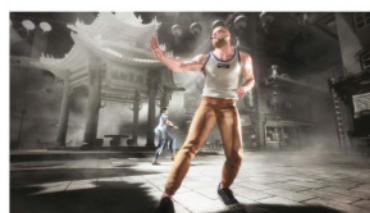
I DON’T THINK I’LL EVER BE SATISFIED WITH MY STREET FIGHTER 6 AVATAR

attached to. But I did take some *minor* liberties with my musculature. I gave myself enormous shoulders and a little head, for instance. And then a bunch more muscles that I don’t actually have. It’s a vision for the future. Which is honest, in a way.

I DON’T BELONG HERE

I don’t think I’ll ever be satisfied with my *Street Fighter 6* avatar. There’s just too damn much to tinker with, so I can never say, “Well, that’s good enough, because I can’t do any more.” I did settle on a look eventually – a real oaf – and once I started punching random pedestrians I was too delighted to worry about my tricep toning.

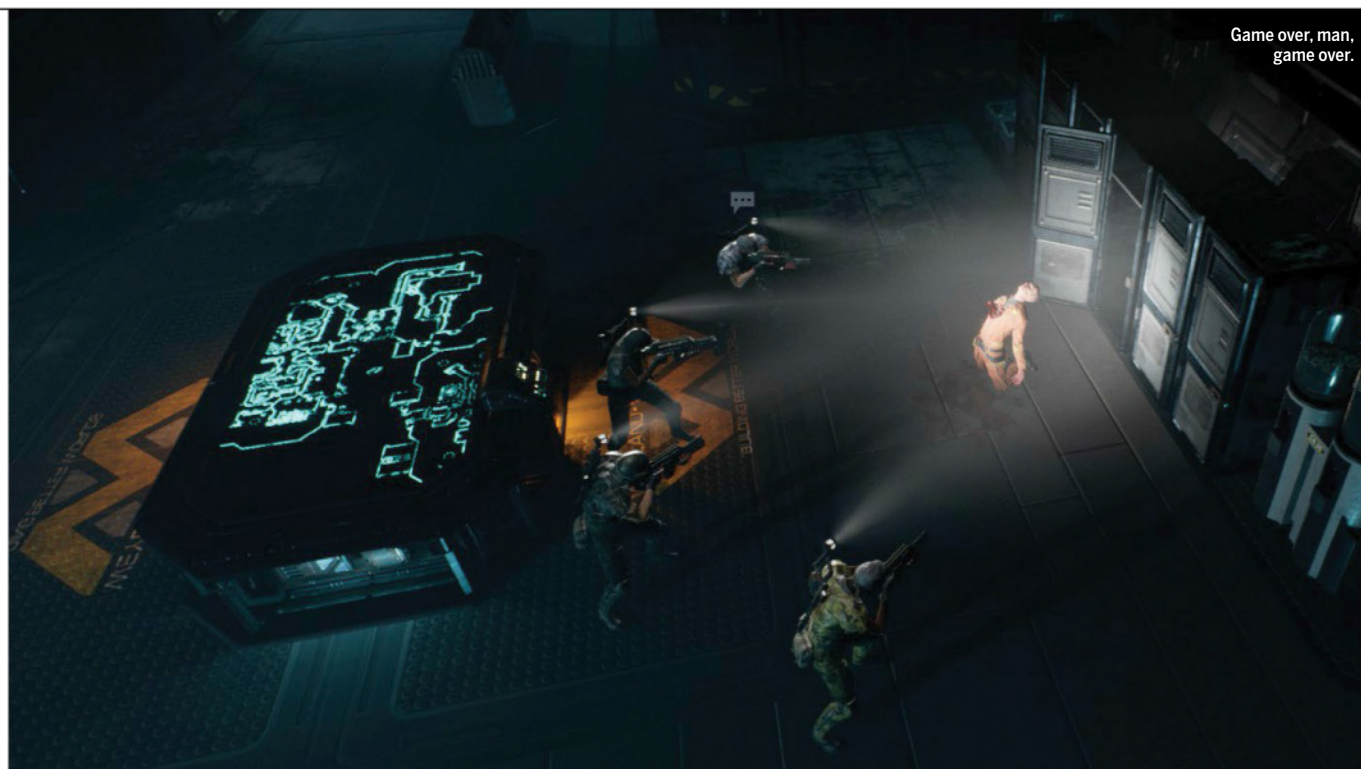
As the story progressed, my mind wandered – yeah, yeah, yeah, skip dialogue, I wanna beat up that level 8 businessman – and I’d more or less forgotten that I was playing a *Street Fighter* game at all, until, suddenly, there was Chun-Li, standing in front of me. Wrong, wrong, all wrong. There’s no way that Chun-Li and my ugly mug should exist in the same world. It feels like photobombing all of *Street Fighter*. Back to fighting accountants for me! ■



FAR LEFT: Feels illegal to KO a regular dude, but they love it here.

LEFT: I don’t accept this new *Street Fighter* canon.





“Self-destruct quarantine. Check. Shoehorned movie reference. Check”

Finding **ALIENS: DARK DESCENT** decidedly non-smoking

I'm an Aliens fan. A xenomorph disciple. A “ran a laser-tag centre as a Colonial Marines training camp” kind of devotee. For this former singer in an Aliens-themed cover band, *Alien* and *Aliens* aren't just movies. *Alien: Isolation* is not just a game. They are a belief system. I've watched, read and played everything related to this franchise, and that has been, for the most part, a miserable experience. For such as I, the endless re-treads that we are subjected to are exquisitely painful. But I can't look away. So, here we are again.

Aliens: Dark Descent is a perfectly workable isometric squad-shooter, with problematic resolution settings. What it isn't, is scary. Or particularly suspenseful. Or very well written. It might be unfair to pick on this game out of the dozens of bad pieces of xenomorph media, an assembly that includes Ridley Scott's own *Covenant*, but, this is my religion, and this game is just more sacrilege.

▶ MATT KILLEEN



THIS MONTH
Still a marine, still got a job to do.

ALSO PLAYED
Chorus, We Are OFK, Elite: Dangerous

We get the same story we've watched, read and played before. Corporate conspiracy. Check. Get-it-done incompetence. Check. Outpost infestation. Check. Self-destruct quarantine. Check. Shoehorned movie reference. Check. Contextually inappropriate soldier-talk. Check. Bypassed and/or welded doors. Check. Serendipitous chestburst. Check. Someone gets dragged through a vent and I laugh, like everyone in the cinema when Brian Glover died in *Alien 3*.

THE SAME PLOT HOLES GROW UNTIL YOU CAN'T SEE ANYTHING ELSE

A DAY ON THE FARM

As this all repeats, the same plot holes grow until you can't see anything else. It doesn't have to be like this. The first series of *Dark Horse Aliens* comics featured The Church of the Immaculate Incubation. Xenomorphs, you see, are preying on people using telepathy. This is why people do dumb things around them. This was genius, throwing a lampshade on every bit of stupid. Instead of building on this, every version since leaves this device in non-canonical languish and our disbelief remains unsuspended.

Like me, it seems the world won't let go of Aliens. But as we cling tighter, we break it a little more. I had assumed that, like *Predator*, the tropes involved are so ploughed into our culture that it just wasn't possible to tell this story in an interesting way again. Then I saw *Prey*. In a world where we've seen how this can be done, *Dark Descent* feels like another hack job. A shake-and-bake game. Why, 20th Century Fox? It's like you're being controlled by something. Yet another opportunity wasted. ■



DREDGE

Like Pokémon Snap, but with deep sea nightmares. *By Lauren Aitken*

After narrowly avoiding a disastrous death at sea, I'm back playing *Dredge* thanks to the latest update which includes a passive mode. While my fisherman is undoubtedly absolutely knackered from sailing for too long, the new passive mode lets me explore the archipelagos without the threat of Big Scary Fish. The large blinking pink and purple eyes still appear, and things still look like they could go south at any minute, but I'm sure that's just sheer exhaustion.

For players jumping into *Dredge* for the first time, switching on passive mode means you can power through the first hours of the story with ease, and without worrying if some nasty fish is going to ram your boat. It lets you truly enjoy fishing, zipping across the open waters without a worry – well, fewer worries, as you still have a boat to maintain – catching lots of lovely fishies you can exchange for money. It's a simple life.

The latest update also brings with it a long-awaited photo mode. It is pretty simplistic in nature and comes with a quick quest to find the aptly named Photographer, who tasks you with finding some lost lenses. After that, it's off to find birds, reptiles, fish

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
March 30, 2023

DEVELOPER
Black Salt Games

PUBLISHER
Team17

LINK
dredge.game

and mammals to photograph. Speaking of mammals, more random events have been added, like orca pods spawning, which you can follow for a short time and take photos of. There's also a battle between a giant squid and a massive whale you can spot, but keep your distance even when in passive mode.

KNOT TOO SHABBY

Disappointingly, I can't dip under the water to take photos of fish and mammals as they swim by, which would have been a lot more enjoyable. The HUD only disappears for a short second or two, which means your screenshot trigger finger better be fast if you wanna snap a good shot of those beasts. It's a bit like playing *Pokémon Snap* with eldritch nightmares. You can zoom in on just about anything above land to take pictures of, including any little birds you spot. While not as exciting as fish, it makes for a more immersive experience being able to take a snapshot of what the world is up to while you're fishing.

For the nautical horror fans among you, there are ten new aberrations added to the gene pool. Aberrations, for fishing novices, are weird, mutated versions of fish that can either slither on board or be caught when you're dredging fishing spots. Fish can still become infected by creatures that slither aboard and eventually rot, so inventory management is still super important post-update. The passive mode doesn't seem to affect whether you can catch aberrations or avoid diseased fishes climbing aboard, so there's still an element of watching for strange goings on and checking your gear.

Finally, a new giant sea monster



A FEW CAMERA AND DISPLAY UPDATES WERE TWEAKED AT LAST

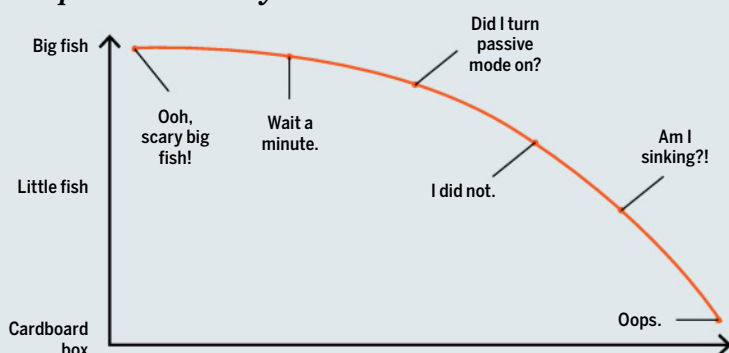
has been added, but it won't always attack you. If your fisherman is relatively calm, particularly during daytime hours, the giant glowing fish will simply swim alongside you for a time. If you sail stressed at night, however, you're in for a bad time. And you thought the chompy fish that chased you around was a nightmare to deal with.

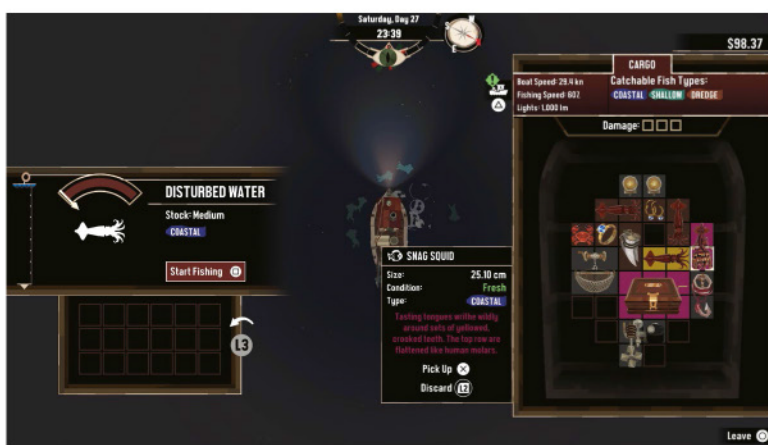
Alongside content, a few camera and display updates were tweaked at last. You can now detach the camera from the boat's turning orientation. This means that when your boat turns, your camera won't automatically follow it, allowing you to have greater control with a fixed camera perspective. This is good when scouting for photo opportunities, as you can view the surroundings independently of the boat's movements. You can also disable the visual effects when using the Haste ability which, combined with the detach function, means sea sickness is a thing of the past – at least when you're playing *Dredge*, anyway.

Finally, you can now set waypoints of sorts on your map when sailing. You won't actually get a little waypoint path in your minimap or anything, but you can set a marker as a directional heading so you know to travel southwest. Look, when you're a terrible navigator like me, you'll take all the help you can get. ■

QUICK CAPTURE

The passive mode stays ON





ABOVE: Photography lesson one: point and click.

LEFT: We could do some watercolours together, you and I.



Just saying
goodbye to
my piers...



CODENAME: LOOP

We're edging closer to the original *Half-Life* turning 25 years old (it'll happen in November of this year) which means it's the perfect time to revisit Valve's classic first-person shooter. But here's a thought – why not revisit it in a whole new way and experience it from a completely different angle? And I mean that literally, by turning *Half-Life* from a first-person shooter into a top-down twin-stick shooter.

Luckily for you, someone is already working on making it a reality. *Codename: Loop* (originally called *Half-Life: Loop*) is a roguelike remix of Gordon Freeman's original adventure through the Black Mesa Complex, created by developer Daniel Almenara, aka PinkyDev. The good news continues: unlike most

▶ NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
1998

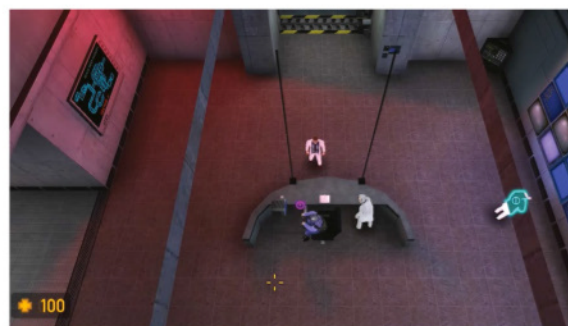
PUBLISHER
In-house

DEVELOPER
Valve Software

LINK
moddb.com

mods, you don't even need to own the original *Half-Life* to play it (though if you don't own it by now, you really should). *Codename Loop* isn't strictly a *Half-Life* mod: it's actually built entirely in Unity, though it uses original *Half-Life* assets and BSP files along with plenty of custom models, textures, and animations.

And while *Codename: Loop* isn't finished yet (it will be available on Steam when it is, with Valve's blessing), it does have a free demo you can try for yourself right now. I definitely recommend it to Gordon Freeman fans: seeing and playing *Half-Life* from a top-down view is a



UNFORESEEN CONSEQUENCES

25 years later we still don't have answers to these important *Half-Life* mysteries



G-MAN

Who is he? Who does he work for? What is his actual goal? And what the heck is in his briefcase?



ADRIAN SHEPARD

What was Adrian's fate? Why hasn't he been reactivated? Will we ever see him again?



BARNEY CALHOUN

How does Barney still remember that he owes Freeman a beer 20 years later?

real trip and a seriously fun way to revisit a classic.

RISE AND SHINE

The demo is based on the 11th chapter of the original *Half-Life*, called Questionable Ethics, which is set in the alien research lab of Black Mesa. If you need a refresher, that's where the scientists had captured a bunch of Xen critters like headcrabs, bullsquids, and alien grunts, and were performing tests on them – often fatal tests like blasting them to pieces with powerful lasers in sterilisation chambers. By the time Freeman arrives the lab has naturally gone to heck, and what few scientists left alive are trapped.

And now here I am, as Gordon Freeman, running through those labs again, but this time seeing them from a completely different view. And it's pretty remarkable how familiar, yet

how different, it actually is, playing *Half-Life* while looking at it from above. It somehow feels entirely faithful – even in Unity, the original GoldSrc Engine feeling really shines through in the textures, models, physics and sound effects. It really does feel like *Half-Life* has just been magically turned into a twin-stick shooter. I'm so enthralled by how it looks and sounds that I almost forget to defend myself when a couple of houndeyes run up and start whooping their sonic blasts at me. I train them to sit with my crowbar.

Inside a sterilisation chamber I start noticing a few differences, such as when a swarm of headcrabs moves quite a bit faster than they do in the original *Half-Life*. And so they should – *Codename: Loop* is a twin-stick shooter and you want a blisteringly fast pace to the combat. It's fun to circle-strafe and blast away with my pistol at a mob of headcrabs, and it's even more fun than when I seal the chamber and use the sterilisation laser to fry a few bullsquids a moment later.

OLD FRIENDS

In another area I run into a Barney, helpful as always, and discover there's a bit of *Half-Life* dialogue intact in *Codename: Loop*. Barney gives me the lowdown on the situation and we set off together: I'm also able to interact with Barneys and scientists by tapping the E key to make them follow and stop following, just like in the original game. Unfortunately for everyone involved, following me around in *Half-Life* is

never a good idea, and my loyal Barney is quickly killed when we run into some human grunts.

Once again I'm strafing giddily around as the marines try to eliminate me, and things get even more chaotic when I grab one of their machine guns. I'm especially entertained when an alien grunt wanders into the midst of the frantic fight – watching entities battle each other was one of the joys of *Half-Life* and it's been preserved here as well. The feeling I start to have while using a wall-mounted health recharger is that *Codename: Loop* is a bit like watching the events of the original *Half-Life* take place through Black Mesa's ceiling-mounted security cameras. It's oddly fun!

Half-Life's arsenal of weapons are all here too, from the crossbow to the Tau cannon to the laser trip



HALF-LIFE'S ARSENAL OF WEAPONS ARE ALL HERE TOO

mine, which I try to use in a doorway to kill a grunt – though I'm hilariously foiled when he drops to one knee to fire on me, thus ducking under the mine's laser. He retreats to reload and runs through the doorway again, this time walking straight through the beam.

It's all handled really well, even things you might not expect: you can even get snagged by barnacles and dragged up to the ceiling – an odd thing to happen in a top-down shooter – and escape by hammering the spacebar. When you or an enemy wanders behind an obstruction, an outline appears so you never lose track of your enemies or yourself.

And if you don't care for the top-down view, you can... turn it off! The console allows for a change to the camera view, so you can turn the FPS that's been turned into an isometric shooter into an over-the-shoulder shooter. Another console command lets you move the camera in even closer than that, turning *Half-Life* back into an FPS again. Amazing. While there's only just a demo available for *Codename: Loop* right now, it's easy to see what a fun and interesting concept it is. ■

BOTTOM LEFT: You guys have had 25 years to learn to fight for yourselves.

BELOW: Twin-stick combat is fast and fun.





HOW TO SHOUT AT THE DEVIL IN

DIABLO IV: SECRETS OF SANCTUARY

Peruse these tips and hellish hints. *By Sean Martin*

NEED TO KNOW

DIFFICULTY
Normal

TIME
A few hours

VITAL LINKS

Get Unique items:
shorturl.at/BTWZ1

Item power:
shorturl.at/kzFP2

World boss times:
shorturl.at/rFHL7



STAT-ISFYING

1 It's hard to know how good an Aspect or piece of Legendary gear is, but if you head to gameplay options and enable Advanced Tooltip Information, you can see the full stat range for every piece of loot you pick up – handy if you're trying to work out what to keep.



REMEMBER TO EMOTE

2 Blizzard loves its emote-based puzzles in *Diablo IV*. If you happen to find one of the many riddle notes while out exploring Sanctuary, remember that you just need to use the emote it describes. Does it tell you to “bid farewell”? Use the Goodbye emote.



MUTTERLOCK CHESTS

3 The key to cracking these enigmatic loot caches is locating the Birth Inscription, Life Inscription and Death Inscription in the vicinity. Each one speaks a word, which combined in the order above, grants the phrase you need to unseal the chest.



BREAK A LEG

4 Did you know *Diablo IV* has super rare items? You're more likely to win the lottery than find one, but these precious pieces of gear can be used by every class. The most famous is probably Harlequin Crest, which grants damage reduction and +4 rank to all skills.



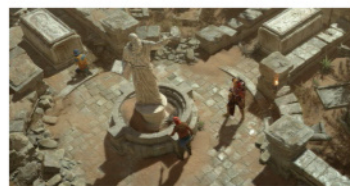
HARD CELLAR

5 Though there are lots of Cellar secrets you can encounter – like a horde of loot goblins – the hardest is this symbol-based puzzle. You step on the shown symbol, but it blows you up anyway. The trick is dodging away right before it explodes.



SACK 'EM

6 Speaking of loot goblins; if you ever come across a trail of coins leading away, be sure to follow it, as you might happen upon a gobbo you can relieve of their valuables. You have to catch these loot goblins fast, since they open a portal and try to escape.



FADED PLAQUES

7 Another puzzle you'll likely discover while jogging across the wilderness are Faded Plaques. These statues each bear a worn inscription like “BID FAREWELL... all... you love” so use the hinted-at emote in front of them, and you'll get a shrine buff of sorts.

GOOD GEAR *What makes for a strong item?*



1

AFFIXES AND ARMOUR

The most important item attributes are affixes, because while you can always infuse a new Aspect, you can only change one affix.

2

ASPECTS

As you level up and get higher power items, the Aspects you find also improve. You can dismantle Legendary gear at the Occultist to get its Aspect.

3

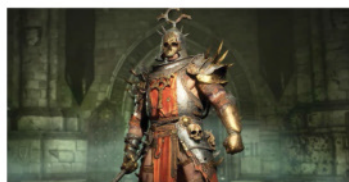
DECORATIONS

While gear randomly rolls decoration slots, you can add more at the Jeweller. Gems provide different effects depending on where you place them.



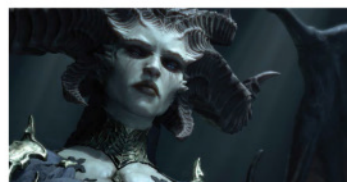
TARGET FARMING

8 One lesser known *Diablo IV* fact is that monster families drop specific item types. Those desert-dwelling Cannibals, for instance, are more likely to provide helmets and axes. It's handy to have if you're trying to get a specific Unique item.



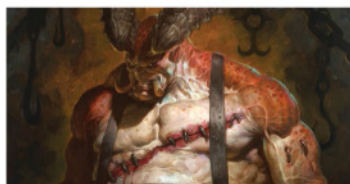
ELITE AND DANGEROUS

9 There are also unique Elite enemies skulking around Sanctuary, and while they won't drop Unique items in the regular sense, they do provide special weapons. If you defeat the giant Nine-Eyes scorpion in Kehjistan, you get a dagger called Broodmother's Stinger.



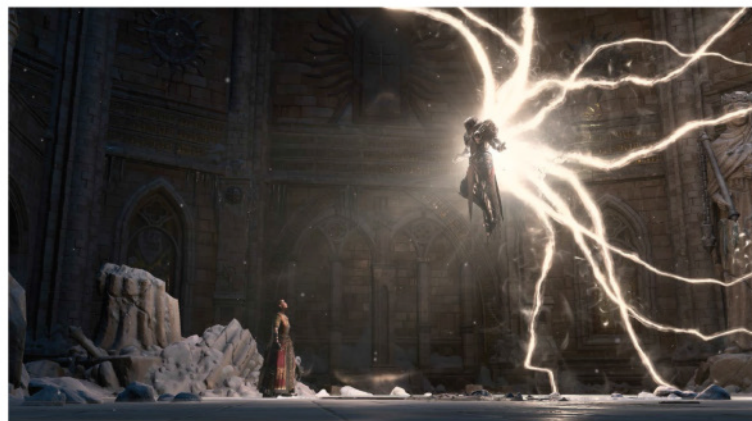
YOU'RE THE BOSS

10 If you fancy an extra challenge, try a world boss earlier on in the game. Though they won't appear on your map, if you head to The Crucible, Caen Adar, Saraan Caldera, Seared Basin, or the Fields of Desecration at the appropriate time, the boss will still appear for you.



BUTCHERED

11 Beware The Butcher; many *Diablo* players might remember this lumbering mountain of meat and pain from the original – now he's back with a vengeance. While you can randomly encounter this boss in dungeons, it's far more likely if you're farming them.



POWER PLAY

12 Item power is super important in *Diablo IV* and there are hidden breakpoints that determine the affix ranges your gear can roll. If you upgrade an item past a breakpoint, its stats are rerolled in line with those new ranges, making it potentially better.



CRACKING THE CASE IN SHADOWS OF DOUBT

PART 1

Hunting down a killer in Cole Powered's
procedural detective sim.

By Rick Lane

I'm in the bedroom of a dame named Alba Lopez when the call comes in. A stiff's been found in Colombo Heights, another concrete anthill on the west side of the city of Lost Angles. It's just after eleven o'clock at night, and I've spent the last half hour rummaging through Lopez's drawers.

Lopez is 41, blonde, with a face like an unsolved Rubik's Cube. An accountant at Tangerine Networks, she lives in a swanky apartment in Adam's Terrace. We're not going together. She isn't even home, though that could change at any moment. I need to find what I came for, and fast.

Phil Noir's the name, and I find things for a living. What I'm after right now is the sealed red envelope, inside Lopez's safe. I don't know what the envelope contains, and beyond being paid 850 credits to get it, I don't much care.

Shockingly, the safe is locked. But searching Lopez's bedside table turns up a slip of paper. It reads "Alba, remember your passcode this time!" followed by four beautiful numbers – 7971.

I punch the code into the safe door's keypad. The safe doesn't like it. For an accountant, Lopez ain't great with numbers. I try the far side of the room, revealing another note with another code – 9342. I thumb this code in, and this time the lock clicks. I swing open the safe door, only to discover that it's emptier than my bank account.

I consider throwing something out the window. Malouf said the envelope would be here. I look around the room again. Then I consider throwing myself out the window. The envelope's on the sideboard, next to Lopez's bed. Top work, Noir, with peepers like that you couldn't solve a crossword.

I slip out the same way I entered, through a vent in the bathroom. A rat's escape for a rat's work, though it's better than laying out old folks who can't pay their rent, or helping Starch Kola's uniformed goons cuff any poor plug who doesn't like the taste. I didn't expect paradise when I arrived in Lost Angles yesterday morning, but I'd hoped to stay square for longer than 24 hours.

The hood in the alley saw to that. It took five minutes and one wrong turn to put me in front of a thug with a

knife in his hand and bad news in his eyes. He asked me for money. I told him the bank had plenty. For that, a shiny new hole in my raincoat and everything underneath it. Nothing one of those newfangled vending machines couldn't fix up – the wonders of modern medicine. But those wonders ain't cheap, so now I'm pinching mystery envelopes from middle-aged accountants.

The drop is a phone booth on Sanchez Street. I leave the envelope in the snow beside the booth. It isn't long before Malouf wires the money to my account. That buys me a coffee and a cheeseburger, but most of all it buys me time. Time to get back to what really pays the bills,

I SWING OPEN THE SAFE DOOR TO DISCOVER IT IS EMPTIER THAN MY BANK ACCOUNT

putting killers in the big house. So I head to City Hall and grab a Case Resolution form – the romance in this line of work died with Chandler. I also grab a few supplies from the gumshoe's locker, a pair of handcuffs, a box of lockpicks and a truncheon, the latter in case I meet any more back-alley tailors.

PENGUIN'S ICEBOX

Colombo Heights is across town from City Hall. It's colder than a penguin's icebox outside, and I'm shuddering like a jailbird on a date with Old Sparky when I enter the complex's lobby. I take the elevator to the tenth floor, thawing as I ascend. I spot the stiff's apartment – number 1002 – as soon as the elevator dings. The doorway's decorated with yellow and black ribbons.

The door's guarded by one of Starch Kola's heavies, so I slither into the apartment through a vent. It takes me a minute to find the body, as it's wedged into the cupboard under the kitchen sink. The awkward position means I can't look it over properly, which isn't the best start. But the rest of the kitchen tells the story. A wallet on the countertop identifies the victim. Sora Inoue, male, 43 years old. Black hair, blue eyes, face like a toddler's building-block sculpture.

I pull out my fingerprint scanner and take a print from the wallet, which the scanner registers as "Type-A". It matches prints scattered all over the apartment, and nobody else lives here. In other words, two plus two equals Inoue.

The killer was a clean sort, there's no blood or bullet-casings. But there is a syringe on the kitchen floor. I take a print. The scanner labels it as "Type-B", ie not Inoue. I also spy a size-13 footprint next to the syringe. I can't check the body for needle-marks, but there's nothing else around that looks like a murder weapon, so I'll have to trust logic on this one.

I sweep the rest of the apartment for clues, taking a copy of Inoue's address book, and searching a box of

THE RULES

1. Must pursue a murder case to its conclusion.

2. No cybernetic enhancements. Do this the old-fashioned way.

3. Violence only in self defence.



personal papers in the bedroom cupboard. Here I find an employment contract with Forte Company, and a medical prescription for beta blockers and insulin, issued by Dr Tagioalisi Kelekolio, which sounds more like pasta than a person. In Inoue's bedside table, I find the code to his personal PC (known as 'crunchers' in Lost Angles). His email contains little of interest, aside from a message about a meeting at Head Office, written by a Mei Tang.

I figure I should call in on the doctor, the most likely candidate for carrying around syringes filled with lethal substances. I check the phone directory in Inoue's living room, and discover Kelekolio lives at 1503 Carver Grove. I leave via the air duct and head back into the cold.

Carver Grove is the next block over from City Hall, which means another character-building trek through the snow. Once there, I take the elevator to the fifteenth floor and introduce my knuckles to the wood of 1503. The door gives me the cold shoulder.

Time for an unofficial maintenance inspection. I pick the lock and slip inside 1503. It's dark. I click the button on my torch, and pull out my fingerprint scanner. It doesn't take long to find some prints, but the scanner reads them as "Type-C", which ain't what I'm after. Then I find a wallet on the kitchen counter, which belongs to someone called Weiyuan Hao. Looks like Kelekolio doesn't live alone.

I'm about to check out the bedroom when the door opens in front of me, a bleary-eyed Hao squints into the torchlight. He lunges at me, but a quick tap on the head

with my truncheon and Hao's lunging at the floor. I search the rest of the apartment, but it seems nobody else lives here. Puzzled, I check the phone directory in Hao's living room. Turns out Kelekolio lives at 1502 Carver Grove. Real smooth, Noir. Keep it up and you could be on Starch Kola's Most Wanted list by midnight.

I leave Hao to his nap and knock on at 1502. This time someone answers, but not Kelekolio. The woman stood there won't give up her name. But she tells me Kelekolio lives here, and for 50 credits lets me in for a chat with the good doctor.

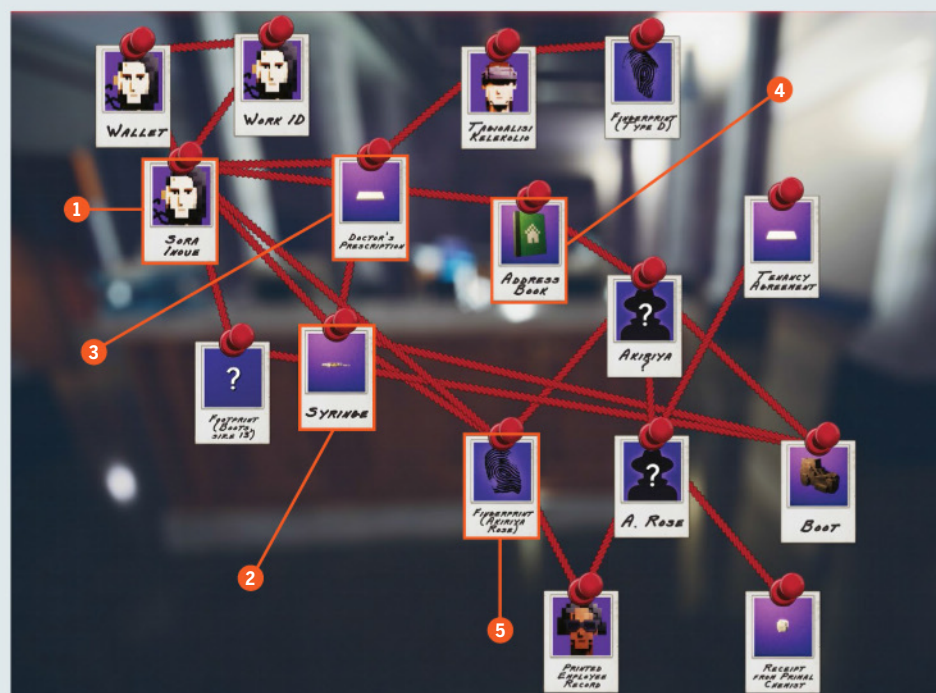
Kelekolio's asleep, so I take the opportunity to scan the room. I get back two sets of prints, listed as "Type-D" and "Type-E". The Type-D prints come off Kelekolio's wallet. Looks like she isn't the killer. I wake her up and ask her a few questions anyway. She admits she knows Inoue, but doesn't have much else to tell me.

I take off. My next destination is a nearby dive named Squirrel, which like the animal is a twitchy number often filled with nuts. I want to take a fresh look at the evidence through the inside of a glass. I buy a bottle of bourbon and wedge myself into a booth facing the door, swigging from the neck as I consult the case file.

I could check out Kelekolio's workplace, but there's no evidence Inoue knew anyone there apart from the doctor. Calling in at Forte Company might provide some leads, but I reckon a better place to start is Inoue's address book. The first name listed is "Akiriya". No surname given, but there's an address and a phone number. I shuffle over to

the bar's payphone, strangle the handset and dial. It rings out for a minute before I hang up. Nobody home. Time for another inspection.

THE KEY EVIDENCE *Putting the clues together*



1 SORA INOUE
The victim is Sora Inoue, identified using his wallet and work ID.

2 SYRINGE
A syringe with a "Type-B" fingerprint is found, alongside a size 13 bootprint.

3 PRESCRIPTION
A prescription links Inoue to Kelekolio, but their prints don't match.

4 ADDRESS BOOK
Inoue's address book links him to Akiriya Rose, his boss.

5 FINGERPRINTS
Searching Rose's apartment turns up matching fingerprints.

MUTSI BUILDING

Akiriya lives at 502 Mutsi building, a curious number given it's the only apartment on the floor. Unlike every other complex I've been in so far, the security here is low. No cameras in the hall and no alarms. There's even a key under the doormat, which I use to let myself in.

Inside, it's a whole different story. The joint is lasered up like a supermodel's shins. There are burglar traps in the living room, the bedroom, and the kitchen. It takes all my dancing skills and a pocketful of lockpicks to disable the devices. But once they're down I'm free to snoop around.

I start in the bedroom, as there's both a safe and a cruncher terminal in there. But what catches my eye are the wedding rings laid on the bedside tables. I pull out my fingerprint scanner and scan the one on the right, which comes back as "Type-G". Then I scan the one on the left, and that comes back "Type-B".

It's a match for the syringe I found in Inoue's apartment. Then I notice the boots by the bedside. I inspect them and – you betcha – they're size



I SEARCH THE REST OF THE BEDROOM, AND FIND OUT THREE THINGS...

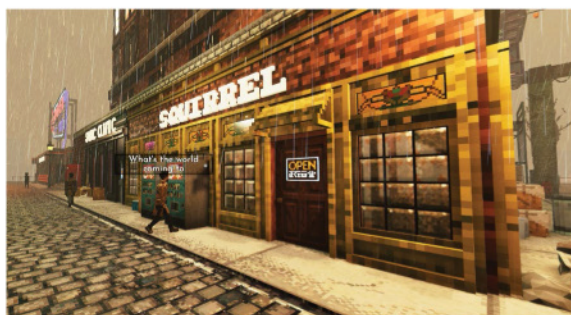
13. I'm in the killer's apartment. The question is, is it Akiriya, or her mystery partner?

I search the rest of the bedroom, and find out three things. First, Akiriya's full name is Akiriya Rose. Second, her partner's name is Danielle Townsend. Third, Rose works at Forte Company, the same place as Sora Inoue. All useful info, but none of it puts Rose in Inoue's apartment. I reckon I've learned everything I can here, but I figure I should check out the other rooms just in case. The living room gives me zip. But while getting acquainted with the contents of the kitchen bin, I find the smoking gun. It's a receipt from Primal Chemist, for purchase of a 100 credit syringe and 11 credits' worth of poison. The buyer? A Rose.

That's enough for me to slap the bracelets on her. I check my watch, it's now 11 in the morning, which means Rose should be working at Forte Company right now. I slink back to Carver Grove, where Forte's offices are situated. A woman with silver hair and a face like a bag of gravel greets me at the door. She turns out to be Mei Tang, and for 100 credits she lets me have the run of the place.

I enter Akiriya's office, cuffs at the ready. But she isn't here, so I have a look around. In a filing cabinet, I find Akiriya's employment record, which includes her photo and her fingerprint, listed as "Type B". There can be no doubt now, Akiriya is the killer.

I hang around until Forte closes, filling in my Case Report form to pass the time. Akiriya never shows. She might be on the lam, but it won't matter. While I'd like to put the cuffs on her myself, I can hand in the report and let Starch Kola's finest do the legwork. Then I might find myself a nice apartment, one I don't have to break into to enter. Phil Noir hasn't slept in three days, and unlike this city, Phil Noir needs his beauty sleep. ■



TOP: Paperwork, the only thing worse than murder.

LEFT: Keeping up with the times as I wait for Akiriya.

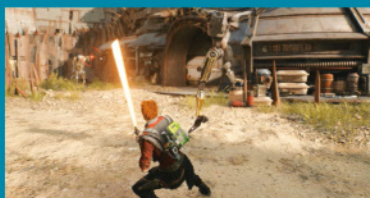
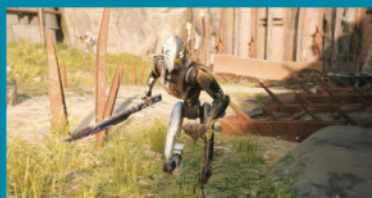


WHY I LOVE

WHAT MAKES GAMES SPECIAL

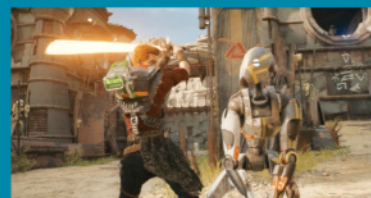
BATTLE DROIDS

My favourite robots are making a welcome resurgence in gaming. *By Robin Valentine*



LEFT: Multiple battle droids at once can pose a threat if you're not careful.

RIGHT: Although this battle droid is about to lose its head.



There's an art to good videogame cannon fodder. Your classic villainous mook needs to have personality, yet be morally uncomplicated to kill by the dozen; fun to smash to bits, without it feeling sadistic or gruesome; enough of a threat to engage you, but not so much that you don't relish any chance to fight them. You know who ticks all those boxes? Star Wars' battle droids.

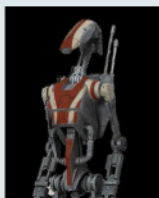
Introduced in the justly maligned prequel movies, battle droids have nonetheless stood the test of time as an iconic addition to the setting. Across the trilogy, and then the Clone Wars TV show, they quickly evolved from an emotionless horde to lovable slapstick villains, and even became strangely relatable – in their pondering about their role and orders, there are shades of uninterested nine-to-five workers just trying to make it through the day without taking flack from the boss.

When I booted up *Jedi Survivor*, the sequel to *Jedi Fallen Order*, I wasn't sure what to expect. I never quite jelled with the first game, and a big part of that was because it made such a bad first impression. It just wasn't Star Wars, to me. What a relief, minutes after setting foot on *Survivor*'s first planet, Koboh, to hear the warbling, tones of battle droids!

Looted and reprogrammed in the aftermath of the war, these droids are property of a bandit clan rather than the Separatists, but they're just as lovable as ever. They're the perfect target dummies for slicing up with your lightsaber – as brittle as twiglets, and you can chop off their heads all day without ever feeling queasy. And developer Respawn got their personalities spot on – listening to them cluelessly admire the view, or discuss their unlikely ambitions for leadership, before you ambush and hilariously outmatch them, is pitch

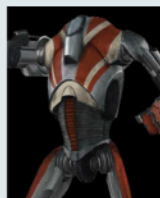
DO ANDROIDS DREAM?

The complex personalities of battle droids



B1 BATTLE DROID

The rank and file droids have a cluelessness about them, and a strange mix of optimism and cowardice. There's something about a robot literally built for battle not being very good at or even interested in it.



B2 BATTLE DROID

You get the sense that these more serious droids are pretty embarrassed by their B1 brothers, but their single-mindedness doesn't give the impression that they're actually any smarter.



BX COMMANDO DROID

Ruthless and competent, commandos stand apart – but you get the sense that they think they're a bit too good for all this following orders stuff. I'm excited to see one feature in *Star Wars Outlaws*.

perfect Star Wars comedy. Even just their generic barks make me laugh – every reedy, “Hey, wait!” and, “It's the Jedi!” said just late enough that I've dismantled their mates.

And yet they're far from just endless chaff, thanks to their different variants. Your B1s are the classic incompetent rank-and-file, but B2s

THEY'RE FAR FROM JUST ENDLESS CHAFF, THANKS TO THEIR DIFFERENT VARIANTS

– those hulking silver lads – are much more of a challenge, and the acrobatic BX commandos are deadly in a duel. The spectrum of different battle droids created over the course of the movies and TV show make for a perfect set of videogame enemies, filling every combat role neatly. Though I have to applaud Respawn for adding one more of their own – melee B1s, so hilariously useless

against a lightsaber-wielding opponent that they add a new layer of slapstick to every fight they're in.

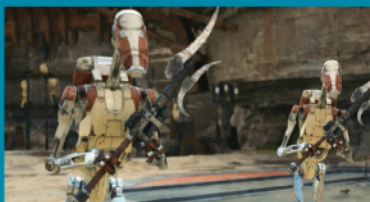
DROID RAGE

It's testament to the versatility of battle droids that essentially they're just the same here as they were in *Lego Star Wars: The Skywalker Saga*. The same humour, the same satisfaction of smashing them to bits... they transcend the tone of everything around them, fitting into a serious story as easily as a goofy one.

But battle droids are more than just something to laugh at and/or break, they're an emblem of a certain time and place. Thanks to the bad reception of the prequels, there are a lot of elements of it subsequent Star Wars media tended to avoid, sticking to the safer ground of the imagery of the original trilogy.

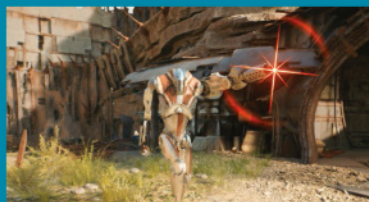
Jedi Survivor is set years after the Clone Wars – but of course it would make sense for battle droids to still be around and be exploited by villains. 500 million robots don't just disappear, and seeing these iconic villains of the prequels alongside original trilogy elements like Stormtroopers and X-wings creates a real sense that this is a transition period between the two eras. It helps flesh out the kind of world protagonist Cal was born into and grew up in – his fight now is with the Empire, but as a child it was droids that gave him his first taste of war.

So I'm heartened to see that the recently announced *Star Wars Outlaws* is doing something similar – not only featuring a reprogrammed BX commando droid still around in the period between *The Empire Strikes Back* and *Return of the Jedi*, but actually making him a major character. A battle droid, swaggering around in a trenchcoat – what a banishing of prequel embarrassment that represents. Sometimes I think we may almost be ready for the great Jar Jar Binks reappraisal. ■



LEFT: Roger, roger!

FAR RIGHT: Oh dear, more battle droid bungling. It's kind of par for the course though isn't it.





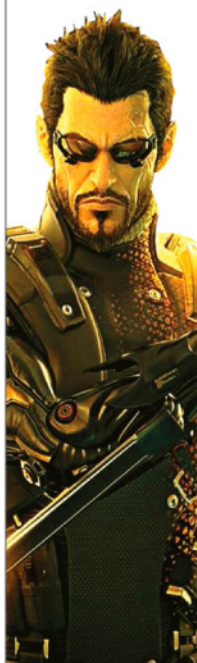
DEUS EX: HUMAN REVOLUTION DIRECTOR'S CUT

Fun with robot arms in the self-serious sim. *By Ted Lichfield*

As a strongly self-selecting PC gamer, there have been times in my life I've tried to convince myself I didn't like something because it wasn't 'hardcore' or PC enough. For almost a year in high school, I pretended to not like BioWare games – to no one else in particular, just in my own mind palace – because I watched a loud man on YouTube say they were quite bad indeed.

So too, more recently, with the *Deus Ex* series. I played the hell out of *Human Revolution*, Eidos Montreal's 2011 prequel/reboot, in high school. I must have rolled credits on it at least twice before ever making it past the halfway point in the OG classic, and yet for a long time I think I'd subconsciously talked myself into looking down my nose at it: too dumbed down, too different. Give me *Deus Ex*? Yeah, that means Dentons and GEP Guns, I never asked for Jensens or explosive revolvers!

ABOVE: *Human Revolution's* dense, lively environments still impress all these years later.



I was definitely still feeling that trepidation when I reinstalled the *Director's Cut* of *Human Revolution* on my Steam Deck and loaded into its opening sequence. Pre-robot-arms protagonist, Adam Jensen, is preparing to go with his ex-girlfriend and current coworker (yikes, that's a bit awkward isn't it?) on a trip to Washington DC for her to present revolutionary new research on robot arms. Spoilers for a 12-year-old game to follow, but Megan is actually the worst girlfriend in history and has performed indeterminate, surreptitious human experiments on Adam, who in addition to being an ex-SWAT guy who refused to shoot a teenager when ordered to, is also a very special boy, implied to have been grown in a lab, who can take on robot arms and other, assorted augmentations or 'aug's without rejecting them and needing a drip feed of drugs to cope like most of the population.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
August 23, 2011

DEVELOPER
Eidos Montreal

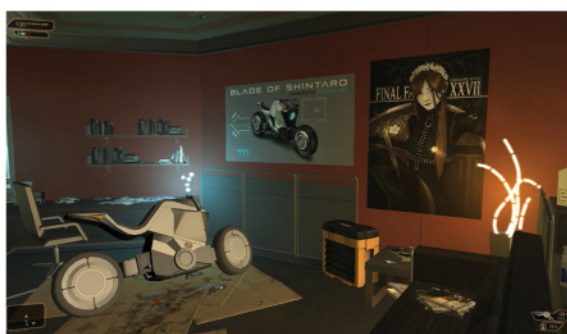
PUBLISHER
Square Enix

LINK
eidosmontreal.com



TOP RIGHT: The office is pretty nice, but what do benefits look like?

RIGHT: *Final Fantasy XXVII* by 2027, we were so naive.



By the way, those robot arms are like, a super big deal and one of the driving forces of the world economy now. Jensen's boss, David Sarif, thinks robot arms are "the next step in human evolution", Jensen's kinda meh either way and just really down bad for his ex, and Megan's like, super guilty, but not enough to let it impact her career or anything. Anyway, I get a Welcome to Black Mesa-style walkthrough of Sarif's facilities where it's revealed to be a more homey, mom-and-pop supplier of armaments

to the US Department of Defense than other robot arm manufacturers like the cartoonishly villainous Tai Yong Medical. Then *Human Revolution*'s diet Foxhound, The Tyrants, show up, kill Megan (yeah, right), and mess up Jensen bad.

OFF THE LEASH

Up till now? So far, so Xbox 360. I got a scruffy ex-military/law enforcement protagonist and his equally boring girlfriend, lightly intractable first-person cutscene,

DAVID SARIF THINKS ROBOT ARMS ARE "THE NEXT STEP IN HUMAN EVOLUTION"

and some stop and pop cover shooting. I was wondering just what I loved so much about this game the first time, and then I made it through all the introductory cutscenes into the first mission.

It's six months after the attack and anti-aug extremists (they're correct!) have broken into David Sarif's main factory to uncover all his dirty laundry, and I'm supposed to go in, rescue the hostages (maybe) and secure any compromising data (definitely). Here, *Human Revolution* gets to one of the *Deus Ex* series' main selling points: some kind of office or other assorted workplace, after dark, chock full of armed guys to knock out and hide in vents, peoples' emails to read, and hidden paths to take.

I was hooked – I didn't even mind that I missed the hostages partway through and had to redo half the level to save them. One of the big things that's hitting me about jumping right into *Human*

TOP TOOLS

My favourite augs in Human Revolution



ICARUS LANDING

Take no falling damage whatsoever, and you also get a fun animation and area of effect stun ability if you fall from high enough. Great for really opening up your traversal options.



JUMP HEIGHT

Adam Jensen's pitiful two-inch vertical gets replaced with the sort of floaty leap I've come to expect from Master Chief. Coupled with some strategic crate-stacking, you can reach dizzying heights.



DOUBLE TAKEDOWN

A little finicky with its targeting sometimes, but usually if you see two guys and press the takedown button, you'll pull some brutally satisfying The Raid-style martial arts action and leave 'em both out cold.



SUPER STRENGTH

Particularly good for a laugh when in one area a guard complains of almost having a vending machine fall on him, and you can then go around the corner, pick up a vending machine, and throw it at him.



TOP LEFT: There's nothing quite like *Human Revolution's* gold neo-renaissance.

LEFT: I'm in a *Blade Runner* kinda mood.

Revolution after a playthrough of *Deus Ex* is how good *Human Revolution* feels. Rough edges grip me, and the ambition and open-endedness of games like *Deus Ex* or *System Shock 2* is something I'll defend to the day I die, but the way *Human Revolution* presents a more consistent, smooth, approachable stealth game in wide open levels reminiscent of the original was an absolute masterstroke.

Look at the stealth takedowns, for instance. In the original *Deus Ex*, non-lethal knockouts are best achieved by tapping someone with the riot prod once to stun them, then either prodding them again, wasting valuable ammunition, or by switching to the police baton and smacking the enemy precisely in the midsection. Anything else, and they start yelling for help and shooting at you. If I upgrade my Low Tech weapon skill all the way, I can knock some enemies unconscious outright with just the baton sometimes, while high-level enemies like MJ-12 Commandos will ignore my riot prod about 50% of the time.

In *Human Revolution* I tap the takedown button and watch a fun little cutscene of Adam Jensen going full John Wick mode at whoever I'm

looking at, with this ability only limited by a clear resource, my little aug batteries. That consistency extends to detection: in the original game, I find I can crouch walk mere feet in front of certain enemies without being detected, while in other instances I've had bullets start flying at me from halfway across a map because of a guard I could

barely even make out. Meanwhile, *Human Revolution's* guards always behave fairly reliably, and I quickly got used to the limits of their vision. There's a place for both approaches, I think, but *Human Revolution's* take on a stealth-focused immersive sim isn't dumbed down, it just goes down smoother, and I can always be secure in the knowledge that an enemy alert was my fault.

BEST BUDS

I love Human Revolution's characters



MALIK

Your 100% dependable best bud. Can potentially die in a tense sequence toward the end of the game, and if you don't break your 100% stealth/pacifist run to gun down the mercs coming for her, you may not have a heart.



PRITCHARD

This jerk is your nerdy hacker mission control. Hates your guts at first, but warms up to you. Has a *Final Fantasy XXVII* poster hanging in his office. Square's gotta pick up the pace to release ten more entries in the next four years!



SARIF

Your whiny, loser boss. Sarif signed off on human experiments on you, thinks robot arms will change the world, pulls a real "you and your dad just tossin' the pigskin" routine that's paper thin. Even still, I kinda like the dork.

HUB BUB

Human Revolution comes even more alive with its non-combat zones, and this is definitely an area of genuine iteration on the original game. Detroit and Hengsha are just as complicated as Hong Kong or Paris from *Deus Ex*, chock full of sidequests, optional encounters and weirdos' apartments you can just break into and watch TV in. *Human Revolution* then benefits from the multi-generational leap in graphics technology, with so many of its interiors just feeling cluttered, characterful, and lived-in. A fantastic game to hang out in and explore.

I spent a solid hour and a half or so just bumming around Sarif HQ after that first mission. There's almost a dozen offices with emails to read and goodies to purloin, while at this point in the game I can only brute

Honestly? I've seen better cyberpunk clubs than The Hive.



force hack the doors to a handful of them. Most, however, have their codes squirreled away somewhere in the building, and I felt like I was untying this tightly wound knot as I opened up more and more offices, hoovering up goodies and snooping on emails to get a sense of what this place is like during the day.

AUGMENTED REALITY

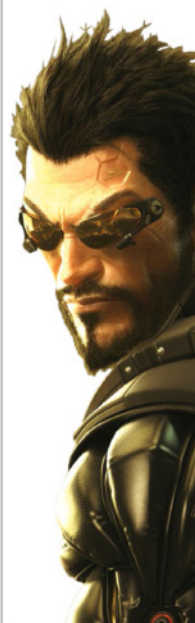
I'm getting more comfortable with just loving *Human Revolution's* gameplay, characters, and vibe while also asserting my truth: this game is dumb as hell, man. The original *Deus Ex* is ten years older and has a vision of the future that remains gripping and prophetic – I think that game is more than due a *Metal Gear Solid 2*-style reappraisal as a genuinely great work of sci-fi.

In *Deus Ex*, all the goofiness around '90s conspiracies – greys, mole men, and the like – belies a razor sharp, cynical view of the coming century. The pursuit of profit and power has become decoupled from production and good governance, leaving society spiralling in the face of myriad crises like a mysterious plague, economic collapse, and climate change. The government can only punish its

IT BOLDLY ASKS, "WHAT IF EVERYTHING REVOLVED AROUND ROBOT ARMS?"

citizens and wage war, not proactively solve any of its issues. Weirdly, however, no one treats it like the end of the world. Everyone goes to their jobs, reads the paper, hopes for things to get better as the situation degrades, the fever never seeming to break. Does any of this sound familiar?

Human Revolution, meanwhile, boldly asks, "What if everything revolved around robot arms?" My colleague, Joshua Wolens, pointed out to me how much it feels like Eidos Montreal just hyper fixated on the original game's tertiary concern around augmented agents. As we approach *Human Revolution's* setting date of 2027 with dizzying speed, it starts to feel more like a *Fallout*-esque, over the top, themed alternate reality than any kind of sober prediction or pointed reflection of our own times. *Human Revolution's* very self-serious presentation covers up what I've found to be supremely goofy science fiction conceits.



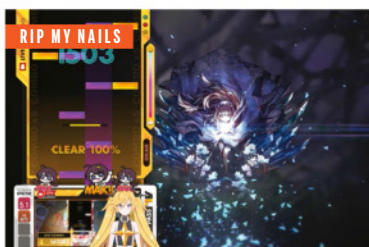
Compare all the human augmentation stuff to real-life cosmetic surgery or AI concerns and it's almost laughable: of course this crap should be regulated, man! In-game though, the anti-aug movement is coded as this dorky, retrograde 'mothers against videogame violence' deal, before getting upgraded to weird, sort of sci-fi racists in the sequel. Anti-aug leader Bill Taggart smacks of some kind of Moral Majority lickspittle opportunist, while the whole movement has been astroturfed by the Illuminati to... do something? I guess they want to control 'human evolution' as David Sarif has dubbed chopping off a guy's arms and legs to give him robo strength.

But you know what? I've come to love it the way I do a JRPG plot. *Human Revolution* is goofy, fun sci-fi themed around robot arms and pining for your ex-girlfriend who did human experiments on you, as far removed from *Deus Ex's* sharp, thought-provoking sort of sci-fi as the Star Wars Expanded Universe (sorry, I meant Legends). There's room for both types of *Deus Ex* in my heart, and I think it's finally time for me to dig into Eidos Montreal's follow-up, *Mankind Divided*. ■

MOLLIE TAYLOR



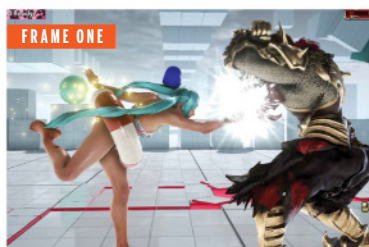
I'm a gaming nomad right now, baby. I usually hyper-fixate on one game at a time, but for the last couple of months, I've been bouncin' all over the place. Feast your eyes!



DJMAX RESPECT V

djmaxrespect.com

→ I've lost more than one manicure to this frantic four-to-ten-button rhythm game. It's chock-full of bangers though, and even has a few collabs with games like *Guilty Gear* and *Muse Dash*. There are also online lobbies if you can rope some friends in to competitively jam with.



TEKKEN 7

bit.ly/439i5IV

→ I've been on a quest to get good at this game and it's going... well... I think? Regardless, *Tekken* remains the pinnacle of 3D fighters. It's still an annoyingly long wait until *Tekken 8*, but *Tekken 7* is filling the gap just fine. Just don't play ranked, it's bad for your health.



STREET FIGHTER 6

streetfighter.com/6

→ I did it, Mom! I played a 2D fighter! I still suck of course, but I've had a blast playing Capcom's latest entry. New character Kimberly has my heart and I love the bizarre and janky diet-RPG World Tour mode. It's got an excellent online mode, too, and is super approachable for newcomers.



HONKAI: STAR RAIL

hsr.hoyoverse.com

→ Honkai's been my daily game since it released in April, and I can't get enough. I love *Genshin*'s open world action, but the turn-based sci-fi RPGness of *Honkai* is far more relaxing after a long day. The main character is way more likeable too, and has a baseball bat weapon.

MUST

PLAY

A PERSONAL LIST
OF THE BEST
GAMES YOU CAN
PLAY RIGHT NOW

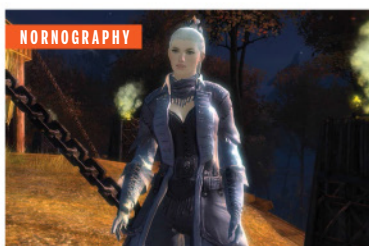
by Mollie Taylor



DREDGE

dredge.game

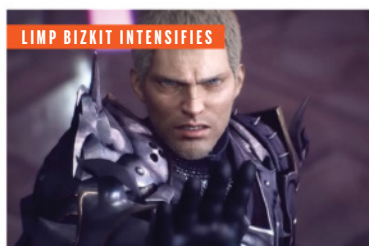
→ Turns out cosy horror is a thing, no better exemplified than with eldritch fishing adventure *Dredge*. I keep coming back to sail its spooky seas – turns out that despite gross sea creatures, this game's pretty darn relaxing. As long as I remember to get a good night's sleep at the dock.



GUILD WARS 2

guildwars2.com

→ I'm *Final Fantasy XIV*-free right now, which means finding a new MMO to fixate on. I'm slowly levelling my Norn ranger through *Guild Wars 2*, and I love how exploration-focused the whole thing is. The combat? Huh, what combat? I only know points of interest and vistas, thank you.

STRANGER OF PARADISE:
FINAL FANTASY ORIGIN

bit.ly/46jhNsj

→ I've been co-oping this with fellow writer Wes Fenlon and I gotta say, it's actually pretty fun! The loot diarrhoea is a touch overwhelming, but switching between jobs and synergising different classes with your teammate is mad satisfying.



LET'S BUILD A ZOO

letsbuildazoo.com

→ I blacked out and somehow played this management sim for 30 hours in four days. It's got an adorable pixelated art style that masks some sinister animal Frankensteining happening behind my back. OK no, I'm the one Frankensteining them. But look at my cool pigoose!



Future Publishing Ltd Quay House, The Ambury, Bath BA1 1UA | Tel: 01225 442244 | Email: letters@pcgamer.com | www.pcgamer.com

Brand Director Tim Clark
Global Editor-in-Chief Evan Lahti

PC GAMER UK

Editor-in-Chief, UK Phil Savage
Print Editor Robert Jones
Online Editor, UK Fraser Brown
Senior Editor Robin Valentine
Senior Editor Rich Stanton
News Writer Joshua Wolens
Guides Editor Lauren Aitken
Guides Writer Sarah James
Guides Writer Sean Martin
Features Producer Mollie Taylor
Art Editor John Strike
Production Editor Tim Empey
Hardware Lead Dave James
Senior Hardware Editor Jacob Ridley
Hardware Writer Katie Wickens
Video Producer Josh Lloyd
Staff Writer Harvey Randall

PC GAMER US

Executive Editor Tyler Wilde
Senior Editor Wes Fenlon
Features Producer Chris Livingston
AU/Weekend Editor Jody Macgregor
AU Editor Sean Prescott
News Lead Andy Chalk
Hardware Writer Jorge Jimenez
Staff Writer Morgan Park
Associate Editor Lauren Morton
Associate Editor Tyler Colp
Associate Editor Ted Litchfield

CONTRIBUTORS

Noah Smith, Shaun Prescott, Matt Elliott, Rick Lane, Phil Iwaniuk, Luke Kemp, Jon Bailes
Andy Kelly, Lewis Parker, Kerry Brunskill, Dominic Tarason, Tom Sykes, Matt Killeen, Ian Evenden

PHOTOGRAPHY & ILLUSTRATION

Photographer Olly Curtis
Spy Illustrations David Lyttleton

DIGITAL PRODUCTION

Group Production Editor Steve Wright
Editorial Operations Assistant Nick Lee

PRODUCTION

Head of Production US & UK Mark Constance
Production Project Manager Clare Scott
Advertising Production Manager Joanne Crosby
Digital Editions Controller Jason Hudson
Production Manager Fran Twentyman

ADVERTISING

Commercial Director Clare Dove
Advertising Director Tom Parkinson
Account Director Jeff Jones
Account Manager Kevin Stoddart

INTERNATIONAL LICENSING

Head of Print Licensing Rachel Shaw

SUBSCRIPTIONS & CIRCULATION

Head of subscriptions Sharon Todd
Circulation Manager Matthew de Lima

SENIOR MANAGEMENT

Managing Director, Games and Entertainment Matt Pierce
Director of Group Finance Oli Foster
Global Head of Design Rodney Dive
Group Art Director, Games Warren Brown
Design Director Brett Lewis

SUBSCRIPTIONS Email: contact@myfavouritemagazines.co.uk | **UK orderline:** 0344 848 2852 | **International orderline:** +44 (0)344 848 2852 | www.magazinesdirect.com

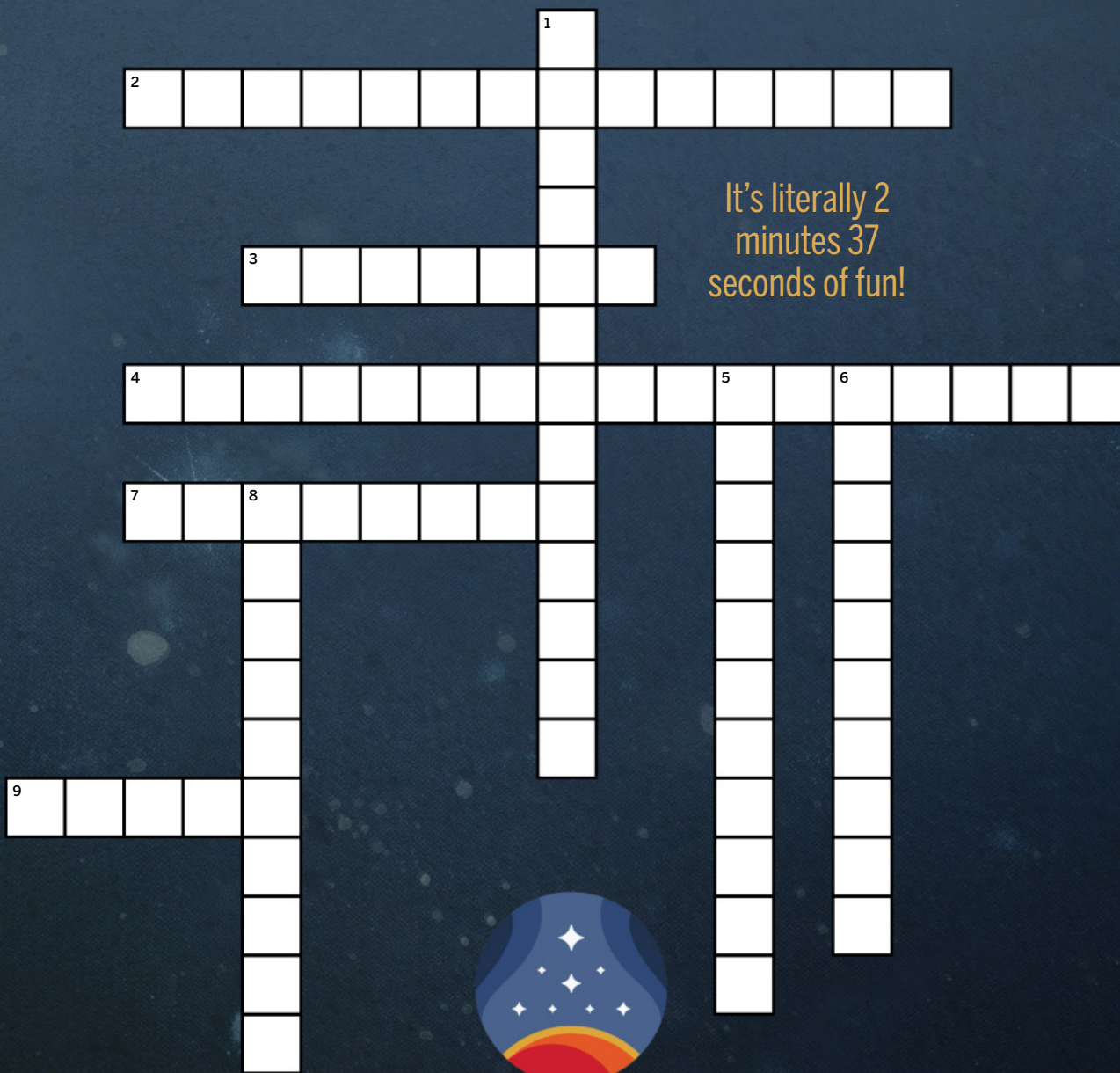
DISTRIBUTED BY Marketforce, 5 Churchill Place, Canary Wharf, London, E14 5HU | **Tel:** 0203 787 9001 | www.marketforce.co.uk

LICENSING Email: licensing@futurenet.com

ISSN: 1351-3540

All contents © 2023 Future Publishing Limited or published under licence. All rights reserved. No part of this magazine may be used, stored, transmitted or reproduced in any way without the prior written permission of the publisher. Future Publishing Limited (company number 2008885) is registered in England and Wales. Registered office: Quay House, The Ambury, Bath BA1 1UA. All information contained in this publication is for information only and is, as far as we are aware, correct at the time of going to press. Future cannot accept any responsibility for errors or inaccuracies in such information. You are advised to contact manufacturers and retailers directly with regard to the price of products/services referred to in this publication. Apps and websites mentioned in this publication are not under our control. We are not responsible for their contents or any other changes or updates to them. This magazine is fully independent and not affiliated in any way with the companies mentioned herein.

PCG'S STARFIELD SUMMER CROSSWORD



Down

1. A group of stars making a recognisable pattern
5. The leader of Constellation (two words)
6. The name of *Starfield*'s protagonist
8. Name of *Starfield*'s director (two words)

Across

2. Name of *Starfield*'s largest faction (two words)
3. A weak force common to planets
4. The area of space *Starfield* is predominantly set in (three words)
7. The developer of *Starfield*
9. Name of Constellation's expeditionary robot

...UNTIL **SEPT 14**

ANSWERS
Across: 2. United Colonies, 3. Gravity, 4. The Settled Systems, 7. Bethesda, 9. Vasco
Down: 1. Constellation, 5. Sarah Morgan, 6. Spacefarer, 8. Todd Howard

Advertisement

Car, home and travel insurance plus broadband,
breakdown cover and more. Get more info or
compare quotes, for over 40 products, at go.compare

**WE'VE GOT
THE OPTIONS.
YOU MAKE THE
CHOICE.**

GO.
COMPARE



G-MASTER™
#MONITORS4GAMERS
by **iiyama**

RED EAGLE™



LET THE **GAME** COME TO YOU!



Immerse yourself in the game with the new GB3467WQSU Red Eagle with FreeSync Premium.

This 1500R curved VA panel with 165Hz refresh rate, 0.4ms MPRT and a WQHD resolution (3440x1440) guarantee you superb image quality and a comfortable, realistic viewing experience.

Enjoy smooth gameplay and take full control of the battlefield using the predefined and custom gaming modes along with the Black Tuner function.

Ensure comfort during marathon gaming sessions with the height adjustable stand by easily adjusting the screen position to your preferences.

0.4ms

165
Hz

3440
x
1440

CURVED
1500R

AMD
FreeSync
Premium

iiyama

Find your monitor at
gmaster.iiyama.com







Welcome

In recognition of PC Gamer's 30th anniversary, we asked ourselves a question: What is the point of the Top 100?

Is it a list of games the team loves? A way to recognise the most important games on the platform? A celebration of the most exciting and vibrant communities? Or is it simply a helpful guide to what's still worth playing today?

The answer, we decided, was all of the above. And so, this year, we've created a new voting system that takes all of those factors into account. And then we had a big argument about the results. That's the other thing about the Top 100: You have to have a big argument. Enjoy.

Phil Savage

PHIL SAVAGE
UK EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
phil.savage@futurenet.com

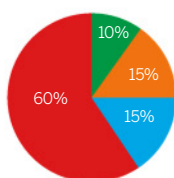
OUR NEW VOTING SYSTEM EXPLAINED

Over the years, the Top 100 has been created using a variety of methods – in recent years it's just been a big argument. This year, we've created a system designed to capture the nuance of the things we consider most the important for a Top 100 game. We want to recognise historical importance, how well it plays today, and also to give space for the newer games we can't put down. Most importantly, we need to just really love each game we pick.

1 PC Gamer's writers vote for their favourite games across four categories.

2 The total score for each category is divided by the number of people who voted, to create an average score.

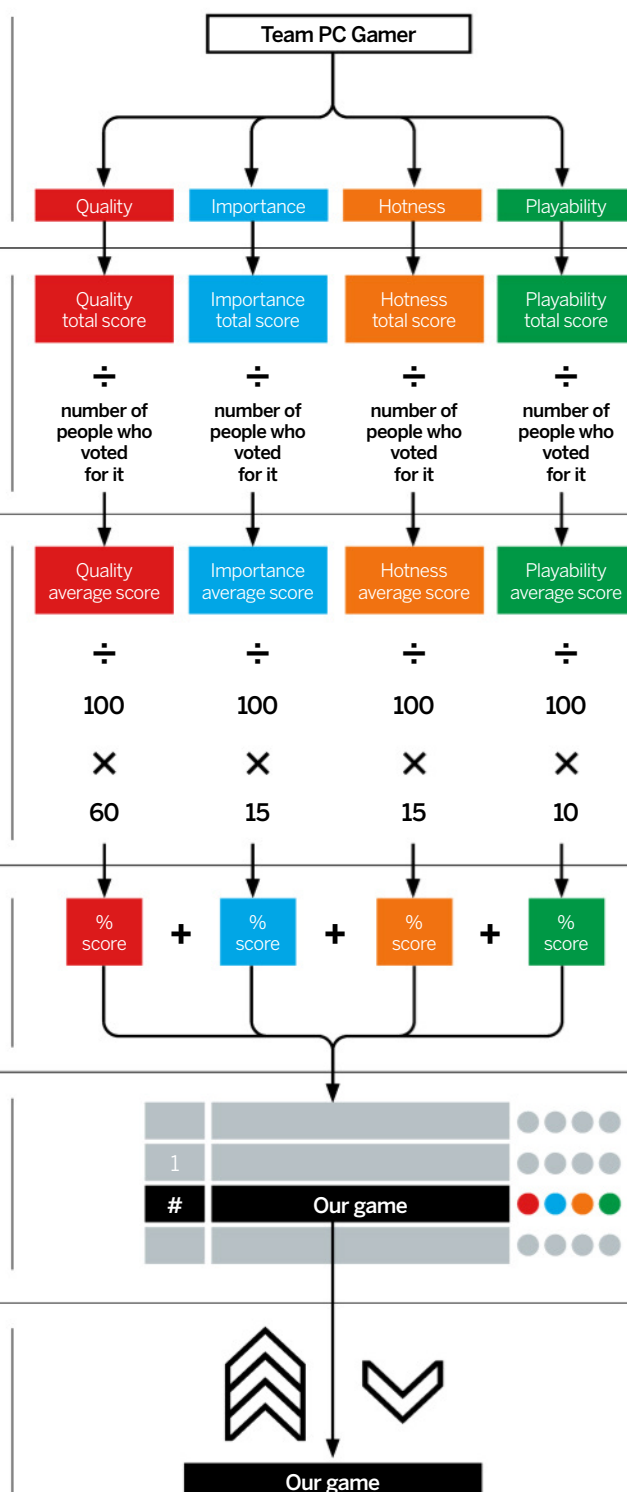
3 The four averages are split according to our special weighting.



4 The scores are then combined into an official Top 100 score, using maths and secrets.

5 The final scores are put in order to give us our provisional top 100 games list.

6 Writers can then demote or promote one game each, using arguments and democracy.



PERSONAL PICK

Jacob
Ridley



CULT OF THE LAMB

Cult of the Lamb says it's okay to be a little devilish sometimes. Play the bad guy, convince your indebted followers to consume the flesh of others, stuff them into stocks when they disagree – it's all good. A macabre *Animal Crossing* at times, calling it that is a disservice to its moreish roguelike combat. Once you start rampaging through spawn-filled dungeons, you can't stop.

PERSONAL PICK

Harvey
Randall



SEKIRO: SHADOWS DIE TWICE

Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice still has the best boss fights in any soulslike game, and I will die (a lot) on that hill. Your toolkit's stripped back – the Wolf only has one sword to swing – but every boss is tailored to what he can do, which cuts the devs free to polish its battles to a metallic shine. Study the blade, get into that bloody rhythm, and you'll unlock some of FromSoftware's best work.

100

FOOTBALL MANAGER 2023

RELEASED Nov 8, 2022 | TOP 100 SCORE 203.18 | PROMOTED BY Dave James

Quality 6.30

Importance 7.65

Hotness 8.10

Playability 6.30

Dave James: It's very easy to dismiss the *Football Manager* games as just spreadsheets for footy nerds, but it remains one of the most influential PC games in the platform's history. Not because it's launched a thousand clones

– indeed there is literally no genuine competition – but because it's had a direct influence on the sporting industry it is simulating. There's no other game that's had such a lasting real-world impact as *Football Manager*. Plus, it's addictive.



99

DIABLO IV

RELEASED June 5, 2023 | TOP 100 SCORE 207.43

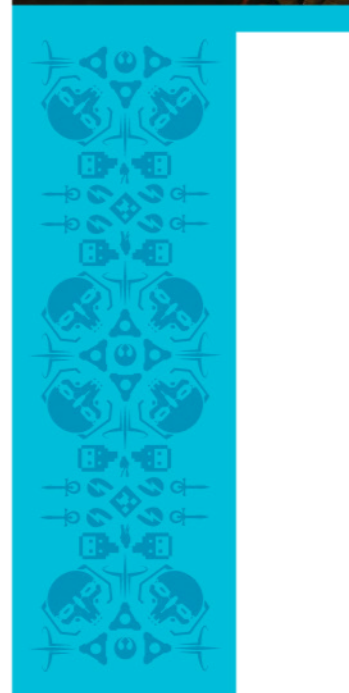
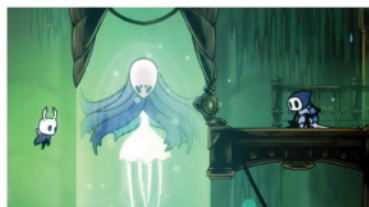
Tim Clark: That *Diablo 4* placed so low despite being one of the biggest PC releases of the year is, I guess, testament to how high the ARPG bar has been set. While I appreciate there are serious issues, my Necro has been having a lovely old time mooching around the lower World Tiers, trailed by a platoon of skellies, delivering justice on the tip of a bone spear.

98

HOLLOW KNIGHT

RELEASED Feb 24, 2017 | TOP 100 SCORE 212.35

Robin Valentine: *Hollow Knight*'s world strikes this amazing balance between hostility and wonder – you're always simultaneously excited and terrified to see what's around the next corner. It's got some of that *Dark Souls* magic – which so many indie metroidvanias try and fail to capture – in its beautiful horror, intricate geography, and tragic fragments of history.



97

DESTINY 2

RELEASED Oct 24, 2017 | TOP 100 SCORE 212.89

Quality 6.82 Importance 7.72 Hotness 7.00 Playability 7.94

Jacob Ridley: I just can't quit *Destiny*. I go through peaks and valleys in playtime, but I'm always keeping one eye on what's going on and finding time to shoot stuff with fantastical weaponry. It has that replayable quality that few games manage, let alone master, even for those moments when it doesn't feel at its best.

Phil Savage: *Lightfall's* campaign was a massive misstep from Bungie, but the new expansion did at least do some things right. Buildcrafting is in a healthier place now,

thanks to a mod rework and the much needed addition of a loadout system. And the relaxing of power requirements means it's easier than ever to get into the meat of the game's hardest activities.

The combat is unmatched in its balance of accessible gunplay and wildly overpowered space magic, and its raids and dungeons are still peerless. Recruit some friends, jump into King's Fall, and have an experience you won't find in any other shooter.



96 DEATH STRANDING

RELEASED July 14, 2020 | TOP 100 SCORE 214.49

Rich Stanton: Kojima's outsize personality can sometimes overshadow the fact that he's one of the great designers. *Death Stranding* sticks with me years later, and it's not the pompous though oft-hilarious cutscenes, but the dogged journeys it sends you on and its total commitment to the act of traversal. You earn every triumph in this game with failure, pratfalls, and sometimes sheer bloody minded persistence.

The pandemic hitting just after release is a cosmically absurd coincidence, one that subsequently layered a degree of prophecy and meaning over a meditation on our fragmented society and inability to act as a united whole in the service of the common good.



95 TEARDOWN

RELEASED April 21, 2022 | TOP 100 SCORE 216.90

Morgan Park: *Teardown* is as fun as it is original: a sandbox puzzler powered by the best destruction engine since *Red Faction Guerilla*. I adore that *Teardown* establishes an elastic set of goals, usually "steal these objects in a minute", and gives me infinite time to decide how to do it. It's the perfect bait for people who love playing with Lego but get bored when nobody tells you what to make.

T100P
2023

94

MARVEL'S MIDNIGHT SUNS

RELEASED Dec 2, 2022 | TOP 100 SCORE 216.95 | PROMOTED BY Evan Lahti

Quality 8.10 Importance 5.58 Hotness 5.08 Playability 7.73

Evan Lahti: It's the best game about superheroes on PC and the best *Mass Effect* game since *ME2*. *Midnight Suns* puts Firaxis' pedigrees on display: unit animation, the board game-ness of it all, its understanding of how to unfold a campaign. But it is also a heartfelt game about friendship, about managing intergenerational conflict, and about the relatable experience of being a vampire who starts a book club just to get closer to his alien crush.

Robin Valentine: It could not be more obvious as you play *Midnight Suns* that it's a game Jake Solomon has been dreaming of making since he was a teenager. It's a wonderful, unique game, combining many unlikely elements into a sprawling, sometimes messy, journey that embraces everything about comic book stories.

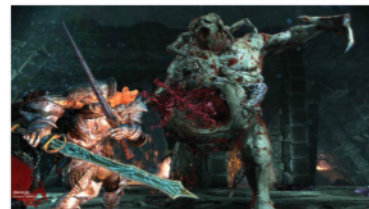


93 POWERWASH SIMULATOR

RELEASED July 14, 2022 | TOP 100 SCORE 220.65

Sarah James: Yeah, I know. This is one of those games where you just want to laugh at its existence, then you play it and 50 hours later, you're trying to figure out why you can't put it down. There's no story to pull you in, and no impressive mechanics or cutscenes to fall in love with. Instead, *Powerwash Simulator* just works by appealing to that part of your brain that likes neatness and order in the most soothing way possible. And if you don't think you care about making things shiny, this game is likely to surprise you.

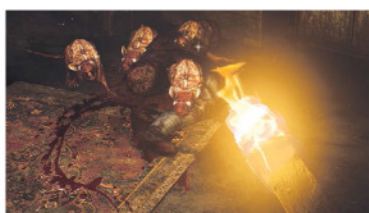
Morgan Park: I love *Powerwash Simulator* for being an uncomplicated, stimulating "second activity" game that you can also choose to overthink and obsessively optimise. Great on Deck.



92 DRAGON AGE: ORIGINS

RELEASED Nov 2, 2009 | TOP 100 SCORE 219.09

Robert Jones: The importance of *Dragon Age: Origins* to PC gaming still, even now almost 14 years after its release, cannot be overstated enough. The BioWare masterpiece proved that big, complex, narratively epic RPGs could still not only be made for PC, but could be critical and commercial smash hits, too. Rough around the edges, sure, but filled with memorable adventures.



91 AMNESIA: THE BUNKER

RELEASED June 6, 2023 | TOP 100 SCORE 217.93

Ted Litchfield: One of the most stressful games I've ever played. You're in a sealed French bunker on the Western Front in 1916, and there is something in the walls. This beast's emergent, unpredictable AI, coupled with hardcore resource management, help make *The Bunker* a horror triumph. It's short, but randomised items and codes make this a replayable nightmare.

90 SLAY THE SPIRE

RELEASED Jan 23, 2019 | TOP 100 SCORE 218.39

Robin Valentine: For seven years now, countless developers have been chasing *Slay the Spire's* pitch-perfect roguelike deckbuilder formula, and it's still the undisputed king. It's secured its place in PC gaming canon, as far as I'm concerned – a hugely influential classic that feels just as fresh and clever today as it did back in Early Access. There's a reason I've put 200 hours into it.



88 FALLOUT 2

TOP 100 SCORE 221.85

Robert Jones: Is this still the most *Fallout-y* game of the series? Yes. *Fallout: New Vegas* got very close to recreating *Fallout 2's* heady cocktail of grim survival, surreal and cutting satire, choice-stuffed RPG and ultraviolent combat, but Black Isle Studios' sequel is where the series' character was most intense.

87 GUILD WARS 2

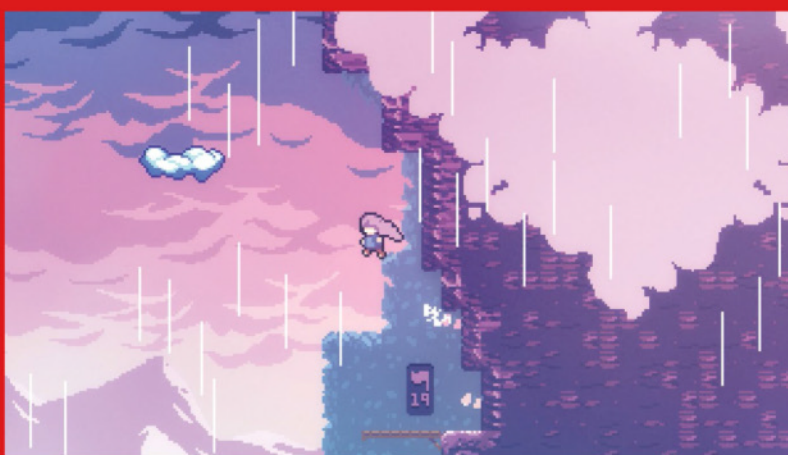
TOP 100 SCORE 218.75

Phil Savage: Every live-service developer should be forced to play ArenaNet's free-to-play MMO. For 10 years, it's been quietly solving the problems that plague online games – evolving and growing without manipulative tricks. And thanks to more frequent expansions, it feels more vibrant and alive with possibility than ever.

86 SID MEIER'S ALPHA CENTAURI

TOP 100 SCORE 219.04

Fraser Brown: Every time we get a new *Civ*, I ask "Why not more *Alpha Centauri*?" Brian Reynolds and Firaxis, all the way back at the end of the last millennium, created the most inventive, surprising and powerfully evocative 4X ever conjured out of code, and it's still an astonishing game today.



89

CELESTE

RELEASED Jan 25, 2018 | TOP 100 SCORE 221.67

Quality 7.57 Importance 6.70 Hotness 6.75 Playability 8.29

Jacob Ridley: A more life-affirming game than you'd expect of a modern platformer. You go in expecting troublesome puzzles; you come out with a new lease on life.

Harvey Randall: *Celeste* is a killer entry in its genre, a great speedrunning game, with lovely graphics, a banger soundtrack and a really touching story. It's a heartfelt tale about grappling with identity, anxiety, and overcoming personal hardship.

Creator Maddy Thorson has also confirmed that *Celeste*, for her, is a game about transition, as she discovered her

own identity over the course of development. That light makes the metaphor of a mountain few make it down from even more profound. I'm not trans myself, but I am a part of the LGBT community, and too many of us haven't made it back from that kind of climb.

Wes Fenlon: The snappy movement hooked me in *Celeste* more than the story. The jump-dash combo here is *Super Meat Boy*-calibre, but *Celeste's* platforming is crucially about thinking as much as reflex.

T100P
2023

85

PIZZA TOWER

RELEASED Jan 23, 2023 | TOP 100 SCORE 222.75

Quality 7.65

Importance 6.60

Hotness 7.80

Playability 6.75

Ted Litchfield: It's a hard thing to make a 2D platformer feel fresh in 2023, but holy crap, *Pizza Tower* did it. The game elevates the level escape mechanic from *Wario Land 4* into something really special, creating a perfect rhythm where you feel your way through a level at a normal, Mario-y pace your first time through, then indulge in a perfect Sonic momentum dash on your way out.

Its myriad secrets and challenges make for a speedrunner's paradise, and I don't even have the space to talk about its knockout '90s Nickelodeon animation.



84 EVE ONLINE

RELEASED May 6, 2003 | TOP 100 SCORE 223.02

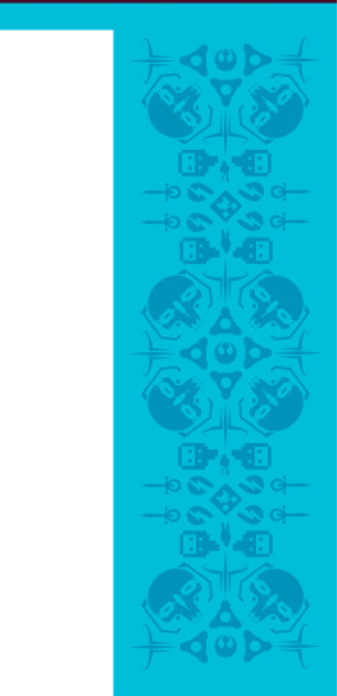
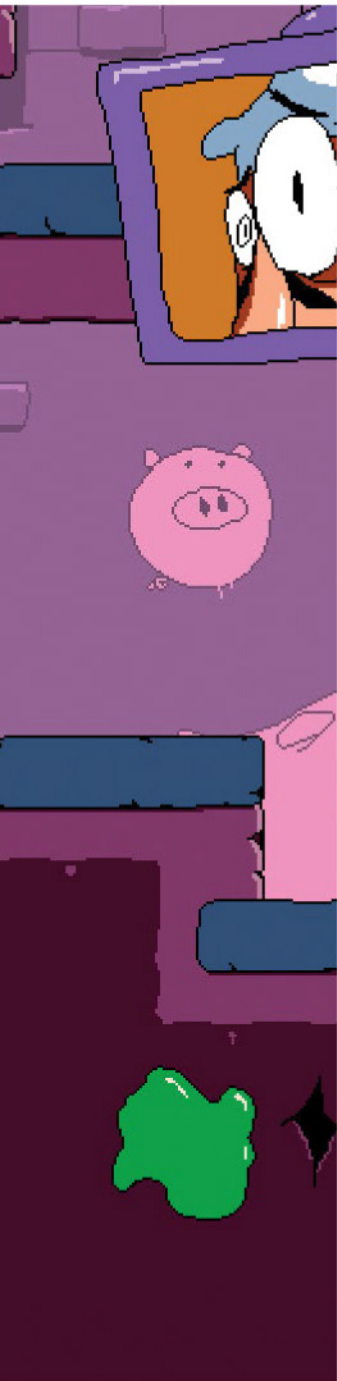
Rich Stanton: A life-swallowing game, not just because of the time you put in but how it comes to be a part of your life. *EVE's* secret sauce has always been that the players control what happens and, in a place with this many thousands of pilots, that battle for control unlocks every last drop of human ingenuity, courage, commitment and, yes, sometimes cruelty and deviousness too.



83 DOOM (2016)

RELEASED May 13, 2016 | TOP 100 SCORE 223.26

Andy Chalk: The 2016 version of *Doom* is one of the smartest reboots of all time, because it's all so wilfully dumb. None of it makes a lick of sense, but that doesn't matter because everything is metal. And not like nu-metal, where everyone's full of angst and torment because their daddy didn't love them or whatever – I'm talking Iron Maiden, Dio, Venom, the kind of metal that adorns the T-shirts that all the cool dads still have stuffed in the backs of their drawers. Loud, powerful, in your face, and utterly unabashed of its embrace of the dumbest teenage rock-hero fantasy imaginable – which somehow comes out the other end mutated into sheer awesomeness. It is simple, and it is brilliant: Guns. Demons. Rock and roll.



82

INSCRIPTION

RELEASED Oct 19, 2021 | TOP 100 SCORE 226.11 | DEMOTED BY Jody Macgregor

Quality 7.60

Importance 7.71

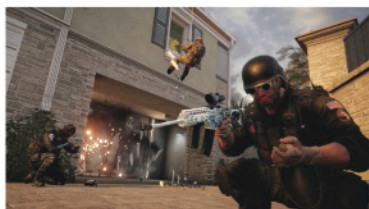
Hotness 6.67

Playability 8.20

Jorge Jimenez: *Inscription* is one of those that had me hooked the second I booted it up. It's subversive, well-written and it's a pretty good card game as well. Just when you think you have a handle on what's going, you're dumped into an

entirely different world and game. It's a wild game you need to experience even if you hate card games.

Tyler Colp: A game about games that deftly avoids clichés. Few games stick in your brain like this one.



81 TOM CLANCY'S RAINBOW SIX SIEGE

RELEASED Dec 1, 2015 | TOP 100 SCORE 223.50

Morgan Park: My most active *Siege* days are behind me, but Ubisoft's tactical FPS remains one of the best around. Nearly every map from the original game has been reworked, and foundational systems like health and the pick phase have been reimagined. It's still *Siege*, so it's still buggy, but it also exudes the confidence of a game that's seen nearly eight years of refinements.

80 PHASMOPHOBIA

RELEASED Sep 18, 2020 (E/ Access) | TOP 100 SCORE 223.64

Lauren Morton: That a janky early access ghost-hunting game could give me more hours of co-op joy than any high-budget service game is a classic PC gaming miracle. I don't love all the changes over the last year (bring back the old ghost box voice, please) but it remains so easy to load up the truck, head to a house, and flush out unruly ghosts while kicking about and laughing.



PERSONAL PICK

Mollie Taylor



DJMAX RESPECT V

An incredibly neat rhythm game with endless bangers to discover, including collaborations with games like *Guilty Gear* and *Deemo*. You can keep things *DDR*-style with a four-button layout, or become a rhythm game god with 10-button note charts. It even has a robust online mode where you can play songs with up to seven friends, or go for one-on-one competitive ranked. The base game is regularly on sale for cheap, too.

PERSONAL PICK

Sarah James



DIABLO 3

It had a rocky start but *Diablo 3* quickly became one of my favourites and had me coming back season after season for nearly ten years – the trusty Templar, or Ned (Stark), as I like to call him, almost feels like family. *Diablo 4* might be flashier, but it hasn't quite reached the demon-slaying satisfaction levels of its predecessor. Plus, it doesn't have Tyrael, who is a far better angel than Inarius could ever be.

The Top 100

79 FINAL FANTASY XII: THE ZODIAC AGE

TOP 100 SCORE 223.79

Mollie Taylor: *FFXII* isn't spoken about enough for how excellent it is. A solid JRPG with one of the most unique battle systems to date, set in a stunning world that will have you wondering how the hell they crammed the original version onto a PS2. If you like *Dragon Age Origins*, give this a go. Seriously!

78 DUSK

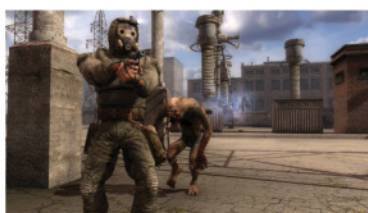
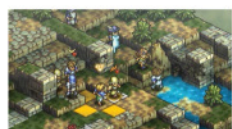
TOP 100 SCORE 224.75

Andy Chalk: *Dusk* dragged our nostalgia for '90s FPS games just far enough into the modern world to capture the best of both eras: It's fast, violent, silly, weird, not entirely coherent, and an absolute blast. It's the big daddy of the boomer shooters, and even now remains a must-play example of the genre.

77 TACTICS OGRE REBORN

TOP 100 SCORE 225.00

Jorge Jimenez: *Tactics Ogre* was the turn-based strategy game that made me fall in love. *Reborn* is the remaster that meaningfully improves the original. Fully voiced dialogue, improved character and skill balance, and a killer rewind feature that let's you undo boneheaded battlefield tactics on the fly.



76 STALKER: CALL OF PRIPYAT

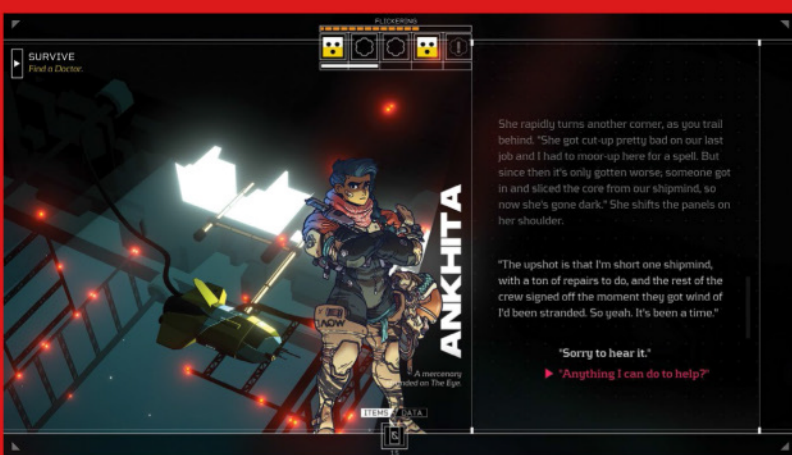
RELEASED Feb 11, 2010 | TOP 100 SCORE 225.00

Chris Livingston: Never has an open-world FPS made me feel more like a fragile, frightened human. One wrong step or stray bullet will leave you limp and lifeless on the ground, just another scavenger lost to the Zone. Every encounter, every firefight – heck, even just walking through a field in the bright light of day – is filled with delicious tension and dread.

75 GRAND THEFT AUTO V

RELEASED Apr 14, 2015 | TOP 100 SCORE 225.46

Morgan Park: The newest *Grand Theft Auto* turns 10 this year (and eight on PC). You'd think the huge gap would have fans clawing at Rockstar HQ for *GTA 6*, but *GTA 5* remains a huge game in 2023, propped up by continued updates to *GTA Online* and the unexpected rise of unofficial roleplay servers on PC. We still recommend the plain ol' vanilla story mode, too.



74

CITIZEN SLEEPER

RELEASED May 5, 2022 | TOP 100 SCORE 225.64

Quality 7.86

Importance 6.88

Hotness 6.13

Playability 8.57

Wes Fenlon: An RPG with little animation but striking character art, *Citizen Sleeper* proves how much flavour a few extra mechanics can bring to a visual novel. As a sleeper – a mind trapped in a dilapidated artificial body – you're mostly reading and talking your way through this story, but dice rolls, some light skills and weighty level-up choices add real drama and tension to the choices you make to stay alive on the frontier of space.

Harvey Randall: I'd heard a lot about *Citizen Sleeper* since its release, but I

never managed a proper run at it. One weekend I became transfixed, beating it in two all-day sessions. For me, it was a game about leaving home and starting a new job, turning the scary and unfamiliar into a home.

But for others, it can be anything – *Citizen Sleeper* holds a mirror up to your heart and forces you to make a choice about who you are, what you want, and why. I think you should play it, especially if you're going through a transitory period of your life. It'll help, trust me.



T 100 P
2 0 2 3

73

PROJECT ZOMBOID

RELEASED Nov 8, 2013 (Early Access) | TOP 100 SCORE 225.93

Quality 7.83

Importance 7.14

Hotness 7.29

Playability 6.67

Chris Livingston: Face it: you're doomed. No one knows that better than zombie survival sim *Project Zomboid*, which begins each new game with the words "This is how you died". It's been in early access for a full decade, the sort of thing that typically enrages gamers, but it's only grown bigger, better, and attracted more players over the years. The depth of the sim is staggering, with intricate systems that govern nutrition, injuries, farming, weather, vehicles, and everything else you could imagine. It's daunting to learn, engrossing to play, and utterly heartbreaking when you finally die. And you will.



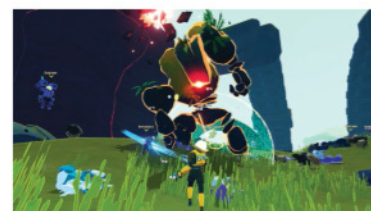
72

BATTLETECH

RELEASED Apr 24, 2018 | TOP 100 SCORE 226.07

Fraser Brown: Turn-based tactics with mechs is an easy sell for me, but even with that in mind *BattleTech* is a brilliant adaptation, full of huge machines beating the oil out of each other. Managing heat and ammo, obsessing over position, trying to sneak through a forest with a building-sized monster – it's all great stuff. Unlocking and equipping new mechs became an obsession for me as I tried to create the perfect murder machines, as nothing feels quite as good as sticking jetpacks and axes onto a metal behemoth and watching it hack off limbs.

Evan Lahti: Bingo. Mechs are durable, fighting piñatas that break apart in stages, which makes them a perfect fit for turn-based tactics.



71 RISK OF RAIN 2

RELEASED Aug 11, 2020 | TOP 100 SCORE 226.15

Harvey Randall: A killer roguelike experience in which you buy void-corrupted items from a giant newt tucked into liminal space, with some of the most wildly varied class design I've seen out of a third-person shooter.

Wes Fenlon: Last year I modded the hell out of *RoR2* and spent a week flying around as Goku, kamehameha-ing mushrooms that spit acid at me. 10/10.

PERSONAL PICK

Ted Litchfield



NEVERWINTER NIGHTS

The original main campaign is a bit rough, but BioWare really brought its A-game with expansion packs *Shadows of Undrentide* and *Hordes of the Underdark*. The real kicker is that NwN's Aurora toolset is about as easy to use as *Super Mario Maker*, just with an insane depth that's allowed talented module builders to make everything from huge, epic campaigns to mini-MMO servers.

PERSONAL PICK

Dave James



DREDGE

Fishing is PC gaming 2023, and at this point if you can't fish in *Starfield* I'm not interested. I don't need to launch into space, though, when I can get all my exploration, intrigue, and yes, fishing, in the cosiest creepy boat-game ever. Bobbing about between islands, landing deformed fish, and dredging wrecks for treasure has been my most pleasing gaming experience this year.

70

LEFT 4 DEAD 2

RELEASED Nov 20, 2009 | TOP 100 SCORE 226.16

Quality 7.79

Importance 8.32

Hotness 6.12

Playability 7.00

Harvey Randall: A well-designed horde shooter with no fluff, and that's been enough to keep its heart beating for years.
Wes Fenlon: Once a year I crank up *L4D2*, forgetting that I installed a mod that turns all the survivors into velociraptors. Scars

the shit out of me then makes me laugh every time. Thanks, modders.

Rich Stanton: Still the best PvE co-op shooter out there. There's no feeling in gaming quite like crowning one of the infected with a gigantic skillet.



69 FORZA HORIZON 5

RELEASED Nov 8, 2021 | TOP 100 SCORE 226.20

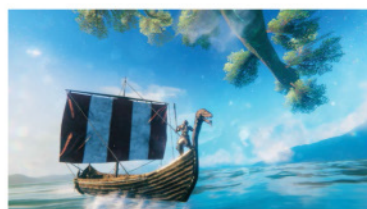
Phil Savage: For casual racing, there really is nothing better than *Forza Horizon*. What it lacks in realism, it makes up for as an expansive celebration of vehicular competition – its enormous open world packed full of distractions. The sheer freewheeling joy of its skill system makes this the rare open-world game where the journey is as entertaining as the destination.

68 VALHEIM

RELEASED Feb 2, 2021 | TOP 100 SCORE 226.55

Sarah James: I've always enjoyed survival games but micro-managing hunger and resources always slightly irked me. So when *Valheim* came along, did away with starvation, and let you just enjoy your time in the Viking afterlife, I was hooked. Plus you can tame wolves.

Chris Livingston: A perfect balance of a cosy farming and building experience and a deadly world filled with adventure.



67

ALIEN ISOLATION

RELEASED Oct 6, 2014 | TOP 100 SCORE 226.56

Quality 7.73 Importance 7.94 Hotness 6.00 Playability 8.25

Jody Macgregor: *Alien Isolation* cast you as Sigourney Weaver's daughter, trying to find out what happened to your mum after the first movie. You're sent to a space station at the arse end of the galaxy for answers, and what you find is a xenomorph.

Eventually, First, you spend ages wandering around a place that looks shockingly like the set of a sci-fi movie from the late 1970s, from the CRT monitors to the dipping-bird office toys. It's a slow build that makes the tension excruciating. And then, when the alien finally appears, it's so horrifying you wish you could go back.

66 PAPERS, PLEASE

RELEASED Aug 8, 2013 | TOP 100 SCORE 226.94

Mollie Taylor: "Political passport sim" isn't a pitch that usually sways me but *Papers, Please* is an exception. It's a game that regularly challenges your perceptions and ideals, placing the lives of hundreds of people in your stamp-holding hands as an immigration officer. Who doesn't love a good moral dilemma with their rhythmic mechanical gameplay? It's dark but brilliant, one of those games that has to be experienced.

Wes Fenlon: Wait, how often are you getting pitches for political passport sims? I kid, but *Papers, Please* remains impressive in how it conveys so much with such a simple presentation. Lucas Pope took the more puzzley side of this game and built it into the even more brilliant *Obra Dinn*, higher on this list.



65 SHADOWRUN: DRAGONFALL

RELEASED Feb 27, 2014 | TOP 100 SCORE 227.00

Jody Macgregor: In the future, some genetic switch flips and people find out they're orks, wizards, or whatever. In this world, fantasy adventurers and cyberpunk gangers are the same thing, so you lead a squad with an ex-military troll and a punk shaman. Between heists you uncover their backstory (even the dog has a dark secret) in a cyberpunk take on the classic BioWare RPG.



64

MICROSOFT FLIGHT SIMULATOR

RELEASED Aug 18, 2020 | TOP 100 SCORE 227.18

Quality 7.88

Importance 7.22

Hotness 7.00

Playability 7.14

Chris Livingston: One of those rare games that sounds like it's completely overpromising – a photorealistic simulation of the entire planet, including accurate real-time weather conditions streaming from around the globe – but actually delivers. Even years after launch *Microsoft Flight Simulator* still feels like a game that's visiting us from the future. Throw in some astoundingly detailed aircraft, realistic physics and sound effects, plus dedicated communities like modders and VATSIM (who convincingly roleplay as pilots and air traffic controllers) and it's hard to imagine another sim ever feeling as gosh darn real as this one.



63 DEUS EX

RELEASED June 23, 2000 | TOP 100 SCORE 227.41

Ted Litchfield: "The human organism always worships," Opines the failed AI, Morpheus. "First it was the gods, then it was fame (the observation and judgment of others), next it will be the self-aware systems you have built to realize truly omnipresent observation and judgment." Hold on, let me just tweet about that on the self-aware system of observation and judgment I keep in my pocket.

Deus Ex remains a sci-fi triumph, its '90s conspiracy vibes belie a story of how power and profit corrode society, and whether it's too late to fix. It doesn't hurt that it's also one of the best RPGs ever, in which exploration and discovery are as much the reward of character building as murder and looting.



62 THE ELDER SCROLLS III: MORROWIND

RELEASED May 1, 2002 | TOP 100 SCORE 228.41

Joshua Wolens: The wonderful final breath of Bethesda at its weirdest. *Morrowind's* world was strange and hostile and its inhabitants walked like newborn foals. Where later games held your hand through plots you now barely recall, *Morrowind* ditched you amid conspiracies, contested histories, and truly alien morality. There's been nothing like it since; there may never be again.



61 THE CASE OF THE GOLDEN IDOL

RELEASED Oct 13, 2022 | TOP 100 SCORE 229.50

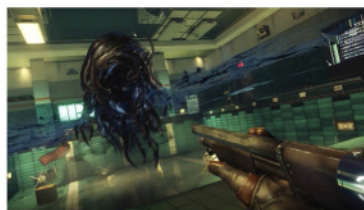
Tyler Colp: It's like solving a murder in a room full of FromSoftware NPCs. Half of the time you're just trying not to be deceived by its eccentric characters and caricatured art style.

Chris Livingston: The individual mysteries are satisfying to solve as the scattered pieces slowly click into place, but unravelling the story that connects the murders is just as great.

60 PREY (2017)

RELEASED May 4, 2017 | TOP 100 SCORE 229.58

Andy Chalk: *Prey* breaks my heart. A brilliant immersive sim, *Prey* is the direct evolution of *System Shock*, a game it builds upon with expanded systems, convincing zero-G environments, and a genuinely terrifying enemy. It's as good as anything Arkane has done – and it bombed. It, and Arkane – masters of the genre, never forget – deserved so much better.



58 THE SIMS 4

TOP 100 SCORE 233.19

Mollie Taylor: *The Sims 4* continues to reign supreme in the life sim genre, but with nine years and £1,000s of expansions, it's starting to come apart. Building is still 10/10, but the actual gameplay can be a bit unruly. There's still oodles of fun in the free base game and fan-made content, though!

57 OUTER WILDS

TOP 100 SCORE 230.40

Tyler Colp: A pure exploration game that expertly balances melancholy and optimism. Its humble story of community and curiosity finishes with one of the most poignant endings I've ever experienced.

Phil Savage: An expertly crafted sandbox, full of puzzles that are a joy to unpick.



59

APEX LEGENDS

RELEASED Feb 4, 2019 | TOP 100 SCORE 229.97

Quality 7.50

Importance 7.57

Hotness 8.00

Playability 8.30

Phil Savage: Somehow the call of Respawn's battle royale has proved too great to resist. The speed, the movement, the frantic gunplay, there's just nothing quite like it. Even if I'm playing much less these days, I'll still grab a few friends every couple of weeks for some chaotic landings on Mirage's absurd party boat.

In the sliding scale between *Fortnite* and *PUBG*, it fits nicely in the middle. Not too cartoony, not too tediously milsim-y. It's just right. The characters have outlandish abilities, but they feel in service

to interesting tactical play and planning. The guns have distinct characteristics and drawbacks in a way that makes your loadout matter. And the maps are – for the most part – visually arresting and full of impeccable crafted spaces that enhance every fight.

Morgan Park: Consistency is commendable, but 2019's battle royale darling doesn't stand out in a year when shooters are experimenting with extraction modes and *Call of Duty* has a co-op raid.

56 THIEF: THE DARK PROJECT

TOP 100 SCORE 231.48

Jody Macgregor: There were games about sneaking before *Thief*, but there weren't stealth games. *Thief: The Dark Project*, or *Thief Gold* as the re-release is called, codified a genre. There's a guarded location and a valuable object: now invent your own solution. Few of the games that followed gave us as much freedom.



T 100 P
2 0 2 3

55

DEEP ROCK GALACTIC

RELEASED May 13, 2020 | TOP 100 SCORE 231.63

Quality 7.67

Importance 7.43

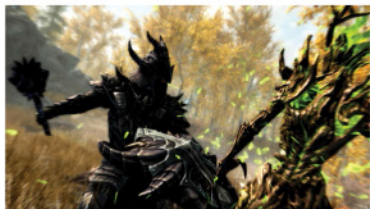
Hotness 7.93

Playability 8.17

Wes Fenlon: Earlier this year Robin wrote an article online about *Deep Rock Galactic* having “one of the last positive communities in gaming,” and I think that speaks to the niche this co-op game carefully carved for itself (extremely generous post-launch support for three years now hasn’t hurt). A bit less focus on

shooting, a bit more on jolly cooperation between dwarves just trying to get a job done. Working class solidarity.

Evan Lahti: But really, though, that rock and stone: the cave-generation tech is one of the few things I’ve seen in the last five years and said: “That’s a genuine innovation.”



54

THE ELDER SCROLLS V: SKYRIM

RELEASED Nov 11, 2011 | TOP 100 SCORE 231.70

Mollie Taylor: Skyrim has such a cosy vibe. I still get just as much fun out of it as I did 12 years ago, which not many games can do! Plus with such an extensive modding scene, no two playthroughs have to be the same.

Jody Macgregor: Skyrim modding’s had an actual renaissance over the last year – the scene’s thriving. Look up *Skyrim on Skooma*.



53

CHIVALRY 2

RELEASED June 8, 2021 | TOP 100 SCORE 231.79

Tyler Wilde: Somehow both a chill goof-off game where it’s fun to ignore the objective and dance while enemy players pelt you with arrows, and the most serious I ever take medieval combat. *Chivalry 2* hits the sweet spot between frivolity and competition, with my favourite first-person sword fighting system. It’s not the hottest multiplayer game around, but there are always players online, and a big update with new maps is coming.

Evan Lahti: What it has in common with another 64-player game, *Battlefield*, is that you’re sometimes able to chain 10 kills together in sequence, against logic, which feels incredible. *Chiv 2* deserves massive credit for how technical but accessible its fighting is.



52

TOTAL WAR: THREE KINGDOMS

RELEASED May 23, 2019 | TOP 100 SCORE 231.96

Quality 8.25

Importance 7.29

Hotness 5.83

Playability 8.14

Wes Fenlon: This vast strategy has real depth in its political and economic systems, as well as giant armies of toy soldiers. I remain enamored of the one element *Three Kingdoms* borrowed from the *Warhammer* games (or *Dynasty*

Warriors): larger-than-life champions to lead your armies. My enemies will rue the day they crossed Guan Yu and his magnificent beard. The next *Total War*, *Pharaoh*, may rocket this series back up the Top 100.



PERSONAL PICK

Chris Livingston



STRANGE HORTICULTURE

I wouldn't have guessed peering at plants through a magnifying glass would be a thrill but, darn it, it is. As a botany shop owner you get to solve dozens of little plant-based mysteries for oddball customers, while also slowly uncovering a dark conspiracy that threatens the entire world. It's both cosy and creepy, and an utterly engrossing detective adventure.

PERSONAL PICK

Jorge Jimenez



THE WALKING DEAD: SAINTS AND SINNERS RETRIBUTION

I got into VR gaming this year and was surprised by this roguelite survival horror game, which takes full advantage of what a VR headset can do. I found it oddly cathartic sulking around abandoned hotels in a post-apocalyptic New Orleans looking for salvage while occasionally shanking zombies in the head with a rusty knife.



51 CITIES: SKYLINES

RELEASED Mar 10, 2015 | TOP 100 SCORE 232.11

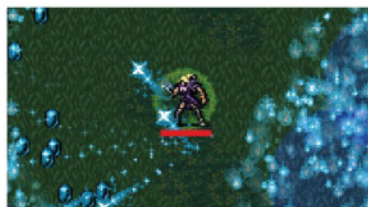
Chris Livingston: The unchallenged titan of modern city builders – until the sequel. It's chill and engrossing to grow your city from a tiny neighbourhood to a gleaming, massive city, and with mods and DLC it never had a chance to get stale.

Fraser Brown: The only thing that's going to stop me from playing more *Cities Skylines* is *Cities Skylines 2*.

50 VAMPIRE SURVIVORS

RELEASED Oct 20, 2022 | TOP 100 SCORE 232.26

Robin Valentine: There is no purer power fantasy in games than building your vampire hunter from a humble whip-cracking Belmont-alike into a flying god of destruction, filling the entire screen with exploding particle effects and building combos so broken you end up killing the Grim Reaper himself. *Vampire Survivors* is a wonderful, ever-escalating fever dream of a game.



49 TOTAL WAR: WARHAMMER 2

TOP 100 SCORE 232.39

Jody Macgregor: I've conquered the world as queen of the dead, queen of the faeries, an opera ghost, an elf Batman, an elven dominatrix, and Dracula. *Warhammer 2*'s DLC campaigns, like the one where you collect magic shanties to tame a sea monster, make it a much more memorable game.

48 DISHONORED 2

TOP 100 SCORE 232.54

Fraser Brown: It might be at 48, but *Dishonored 2* will always be in my top 10. This is Arkane at its best, a game filled with some of the best sneaky puzzles. Every level is a novelty, able to be completed in a ridiculous number of ways, whether you want to be an invisible ghost or a chaotic mass-murderer.

47 VAMPIRE THE MASQUERADE - BLOODLINES

TOP 100 SCORE 233.20

Ted Litchfield: I could, and have, gone on at length about its reactivity, characters, and depth, but it's the vibes. A kind of grungy, punk Holyweird that, if it was ever "real," is on the way out. Pondering a dying vampire society in a dying city at the geographic end of America.



46 SYSTEM SHOCK (REMAKE)

RELEASED May 30, 2023 | TOP 100 SCORE 233.73

Andy Chalk: Nightdive's remake of the legendary immersive sim modernises the interface and tarts up the graphics, but otherwise lets the glory of the original shine through. You can forget about mission markers or regenerating health, but that's how it should be. The remake plays like a modern, "new" imm-sim, while absolutely nailing the vibe of the mid-'90s. And it is great.

45 HALF-LIFE: ALYX

RELEASED Mar 23, 2020 | TOP 100 SCORE 233.83

Chris Livingston: Tough one to gauge – how important can a game be if most gamers don't have the VR setup to play it? And how playable is it as a result? On the other hand, nuts to those concerns because *Alyx* is friggin' awesome. It breathes new life into a storyline that Valve abandoned for almost 15 years, and it's one of the most stunning and technically impressive VR games ever.



44

PILLARS OF ETERNITY 2: DEADFIRE

RELEASED May 8, 2018 | TOP 100 SCORE 234.00

Quality 8.60 Importance 6.33 Hotness 5.80 Playability 8.20

Ted Litchfield: Twenty years after its heyday, Obsidian achieved peak pre-rendered backgrounds. *Disco Elysium* is also up there, but *Deadfire*'s fantasy vistas are just so rich and complex in addition to being artful and creative.

Few videogame moments evoke that feeling of yo-ho high seas pirate adventure better than stepping into the bustling, cosmopolitan port of Neketaka, or considering some ruin on a distant shore.

And this is maybe one of the best RPG world maps ever, too. Just clicking your

ship around from a bird's-eye view feels so satisfying and immersive thanks to the sound design of your creaking hull and the crashing waves, as well as the crew-dependent sea shanties.

Like *New Vegas*, *Deadfire* just nails factions, competing, mutually-exclusive visions of the world and the likable, believable people you might be betraying by committing to any one of them. Shout out to companion Maia Rua, your quirky, charming sniper who's also a fascist assassin gunning for local politicians.



43

NIER AUTOMATA

RELEASED Mar 17, 2017 | TOP 100 SCORE 234.10

Quality 8.30

Importance 7.60

Hotness 6.56

Playability 7.00

Mollie Taylor: *Nier: Automata* is undoubtedly one of the greatest RPGs of all time. Heart-wrenching storytelling with a dash of existential crisis? Check. Sick as hell combat set in a gorgeously dystopian world? Check! The PC port is a lot better these days too, leaving no excuse not to play it.

Wes Fenlon: I don't know why Mollie neglected to mention the horny robots.

Mollie: Come for the thighs, stay for the cries.

Ted Litchfield: The robots are still horny, but the first game was even harder to justify to someone looking over your shoulder as you play.



42 DOOM (1993)

RELEASED Dec 10, 1993 | TOP 100 SCORE 234.5

Ted Litchfield: There's a reason they put it on everything, man. I'd practically invented 3D level design as we know it, and it speaks to *Doom*'s excellence that thirty years later, we're still playing by its rules. The fact that the source port, WAD creation community is still one of the most vibrant modding scenes in gaming is just gravy.

Wes Fenlon: It took playing *Doom Eternal* to make me realise how much I missed the labyrinths of classic *Doom*. The shooting is really secondary to the excitement and tension of feeling your way through the moody levels and never knowing if the next door will have a couple of cacodemons waiting behind it, which is why new WADs will keep *Doom* relevant until the actual apocalypse.



41 STARCRAFT 2

RELEASED July 27, 2010 | TOP 100 SCORE 235.15

Rich Stanton: Still my favourite RTS, because this is just loops within loops (within loops). Every single thing can be done better and faster. Every time you're paying attention to one thing, another needs it. You're constantly juggling base-building with army management, and almost every time you get comfortable oh my god they're dropping in the back of my base.

PERSONAL PICK

Andy
Chalk



WHAT REMAINS OF EDITH FINCH

Walking simulators trade interactivity for narrative, and none do it better than *Edith Finch*, the haunting tale of a young girl, her family, and their strange, sprawling multi-generational home. It's absolutely heart-wrenching – I still choke up thinking about parts of it – and a masterclass in digital storytelling. If you're not at least dewy-eyed by the end, please check your pulse.

PERSONAL PICK

Jody
Macgregor



THE WOLF AMONG US

The juxtaposition of neo-noir storytelling and fairytale characters makes Telltale's mystery something special. When you have to decide how rough to be with a suspect, the fact it's Toad of Toad Hall lends a definite frisson. And though it's a trite observation, fairytales are dark too, as in the scene where the Little Mermaid winces through a strip-club audition, every step 1,000 knives.

40

DAVE THE DIVER

RELEASED June 28, 2023 | TOP 100 SCORE 235.76

Quality 8.17 Importance 6.00 Hotness 7.86 Playability 8.80

Chris Livingston: If it were just a cute sim about fishing and running a restaurant, it'd be plenty, but that's just the start. It's a surprisingly charming adventure as new activities, systems, and minigames are added nearly every time you play, and 30

hours in – heck, even during the end credits – it's still giving you new stuff.

Evan Lahti: *Stardew Valley's* feeling of passive accumulation with some of *Subnautica's* sense of danger and wonder, overflowing with anime charm.



39 TEAM FORTRESS 2

RELEASED Oct 10, 2007 | TOP 100 SCORE 235.94

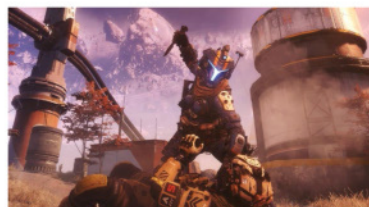
Phil Savage: Call it cope, but there's comfort in *Team Fortress 2's* current period of stagnation. It's a gentle old friend, ready and waiting should I ever decide to return. And because it's still somehow one of the biggest, most populated free-to-play multiplayer shooters on Steam, I know that if I do, it'll be full of people to match with. Even typing this, I'm feeling the nostalgic pull.

38 TITANFALL 2

RELEASED Oct 28, 2016 | TOP 100 SCORE 236.40

Wes Fenlon: I keep waiting for a singleplayer FPS campaign to wow me like *Titanfall 2's*, but all that's happening is I keep getting older. Why can't they all give me a lovely robot buddy and a new fully explored gimmick every level?

Robin Valentine: There's a reason games journalists will never stop banging on about this game. It's just an unrelenting barrage of creativity.



T100P
2023

37

FROSTPUNK

RELEASED Apr 24, 2018 | TOP 100 SCORE 236.63

Quality 8.25

Importance 7.38

Hotness 6.63

Playability 8.38

Chris Livingston: *Frostpunk* showed the real potential of survival city builders, demonstrating that the struggle is deeper than limited resources and harsh weather. It's not just about keeping your citizens alive, it's about holding society together and trying to avoid becoming a ruthless tyrant in the process. One of the best survival games ever.

Fraser Brown: I am so tired of survival games, but not *Frostpunk*. It's harsh and the world is trying very hard to kill you, but it manages to avoid ever feeling like a slog. Even after finishing it and its DLC, I crave more. Good thing *Frostpunk 2* is coming.



36

HALO: THE MASTER CHIEF COLLECTION

RELEASED Dec 3, 2019 | TOP 100 SCORE 236.88

Wes Fenlon: It's a real shame that *Halo Infinite* completely failed to adapt to the live service era, but we do have the ultimate consolation prize: a bundle that will let us relive *Halo*'s glory days far into the future. Y'all remember how good that *ODST* campaign is? Did you know you can mod in maps now and there's a game browser? God bless the ring.

Morgan Park: A 10/10 for importance if you ask me. *Halo* was more of a console series for most of Bungie's run, but PC is the definitive way to enjoy these classics in 2023. 343 brought this one back from a crap launch and has kept updating it for nine years. You can fire this up, press three buttons, and materialise on *Combat Evolved*'s Blood Gulch with a full lobby. Magic.



35

RETURN OF THE OBRA DINN

RELEASED Oct 18, 2018 | TOP 100 SCORE 237.21

Wes Fenlon: An improbably brilliant game about using a magic stopwatch to solve the deaths and disappearances of the crew of sailors aboard a 19th century merchant ship. In 2018 I voted for *Into the Breach* as our GOTY, but over time I've come to regret it. The 10 hours I spent unwinding this game remain vivid and singular in my memory. Five years later it's still wholly unique.

T100P

2023

34

STELLARIS

RELEASED May 9, 2016 | TOP 100 SCORE 238.03

Quality 8.00

Importance 7.57

Hotness 7.86

Playability 8.20

Robin Valentine: Like the universe itself, *Stellaris* is ever-expanding. At the rate Paradox is still releasing DLC and free updates, I know which one is going to end up being bigger. Coming to it in 2023, you're treated to a near-exhaustive toolbox of sci-fi simulation, letting you build an empire in almost any form you can imagine.

Embracing every genre trope it can, *Stellaris* invites you to become the CEO of an all-conquering megacorporation, the uniting will of a relentless hive mind, the barbarian king of a horde of radioactive marauders, and more. You can easily lose hundreds of hours to its rich sandbox galaxies – and I have.



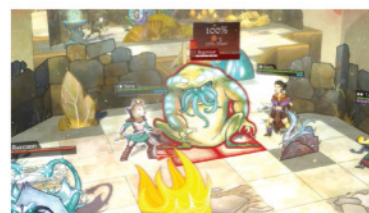
33

METAL GEAR SOLID V: THE PHANTOM PAIN

RELEASED Sep 1, 2015 | TOP 100 SCORE 238.10

Wes Fenlon: Despite Hideo Kojima being the biggest film geek in the world, I love that the latest stage of his career has largely been dedicated to the rich stories and surprises that come out of deeply systemic games rather than drawn-out cutscenes. The worst bit of *MGSV*, by far, is the on-rails opening; it then opens up into an open world stealth game that embarrassed *Assassin's Creed* so badly they had to go off and make RPGs instead for eight years.

Rich Stanton: I love the approaches in this game. You've been dropped off nearby and slowly approach the target, tagging guards, noting landmarks and weapons, and then you go in and... sometimes it's a perfect run, silent and fruitful, and sometimes total chaos.



32

WILDERMYTH

RELEASED June 15, 2021 | TOP 100 SCORE 239.38

Harvey Randall: Some games, like *Disco Elysium*, capture the feeling of playing a few killer sessions of a tabletop game spectacularly. *Wildermyth* hits a different beat, recreating the sensation of those years-long campaigns where characters change, die, grow old, become cursed, and eventually find a place to fade from the story.



31 YAKUZA 0

RELEASED Aug 1, 2018 | TOP 100 SCORE 239.7

Lauren Morton: Much as I adore the newest *Yakuza: Like A Dragon*, I'm proud to supplant it with the best entry point to the series. This top-tier brawler sealed *Yakuza*'s success in the west, and the glitz of organised crime in the '80s takes on almost mythical status as Kiryu and Majima punch their way through melodrama and tomfoolery in equal parts.

30 MONSTER HUNTER RISE

RELEASED Jan 12, 2022 | TOP 100 SCORE 240.13

Morgan Park: There's a good argument to be made that *Monster Hunter Rise* is the best in the series. There's an equally valid voice in my head saying Capcom has taken the 'hunt' out of *Monster Hunter* by flattening the search phase and trivialising old survival mechanics. Maybe a theoretical *World 2* will be the great unifying *Monster Hunter*.



28 KERBAL SPACE PROGRAM

TOP 100 SCORE 240.30

Wes Fenlon: One of only two astrophysics sims masquerading as slapstick videogames in existence, and the one we're recommending while *KSP2* goes through early access. **Chris Livingston:** The best way to get me to forget I'm learning is to make failing fun, and in *KSP* disasters are just as rewarding as success.

27 HUNT: SHOWDOWN

TOP 100 SCORE 240.86

Evan Lahti: The best-designed multiplayer FPS on the market. Combining slow cowboy weapons, an eerie environment, high-fidelity sound design, and undead AI hazards. Crytek has created a novel kind of stealth-extraction shooter where a single hard-earned kill feels meaningful.

26 HITMAN 3

TOP 100 SCORE 241.38

Jorge Jimenez: Name another game where you can hit someone in the face with a brick of supercocaine. Go ahead, I'm waiting. More importantly, *Hitman 3* includes all the levels and modes from the two previous *Hitman* games, which were also incredible. It's the perfect sandbox murder simulator.



29

PLANESCAPE: TORMENT

RELEASED Dec 12, 1999 | TOP 100 SCORE 240.16

Quality 8.88 Importance 8.55 Hotness 5.55 Playability 5.67

Jody Macgregor: Planescape is the coolest D&D setting. All of existence is here, connected by a city with doors that lead literally everywhere. Planescape stops to ask: "What would a city where angels and demons walk down the same street be like?"

The answer is "weird as heck", and *Torment* focuses on that. It's still a fantasy RPG with combat and quests, but everything's twisted at least 90 degrees from the norm. Your party includes a clockwork robot, a talking skull, a wizard

who is permanently on fire, and a reformed succubus. The questgiving factions include Dustmen, who believe everyone's dead but don't know it yet; Sensates, who've decided enlightenment comes via experiencing absolutely everything; and Xaositects, who consider "LOL random" a holy writ.

Meanwhile, you're an amnesiac who wakes in a morgue with a letter you wrote to yourself tattooed on your back. Somehow, you manage to out-weird the whole lot of them.

T100P
2023

25

FALLOUT: NEW VEGAS

RELEASED Oct 9, 2010 | TOP 100 SCORE 241.57

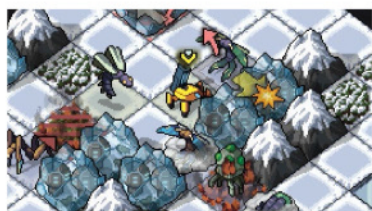
Quality 8.52

Importance 8.24

Hotness 7.35

Playability 6.00

Jody Macgregor: *New Vegas* has the best factions in *Fallout*, like the Elvis impersonators whose scavenged knowledge of Elvis is so patchy they don't know his name, and being able to side with those groups helps make it replayable. It's got some of the creepiest vaults too, like Vault 22, overgrown with mutant plants thanks to an agriculture experiment gone predictably wrong, and some of *Fallout*'s wildest juxtapositions of atomic age sci-fi with post-apocalypse grit in the DLC *Old World Blues*. When Lauren, Chris, and I did the *Fallout* tier list, *New Vegas* came in with the top ranking: Dogmeat. (The bottom rank was "Dogshit".)



24 INTO THE
BREACH

RELEASED Feb 27, 2018 | TOP 100 SCORE 242.09

Robin Valentine: It's easy to forget about *Into the Breach*. It launched, it was incredible, we all played it to death, and then it faded from our minds. If you haven't played it since 2018, go boot it up right now. Surprise! It's still one of the best turn-based strategy games ever made. Brilliantly minimalist and impossibly elegant, it makes you think about the whole genre in a new way.



23 ELDEN
RING

RELEASED Feb 24, 2022 | TOP 100 SCORE 238.66

Wes Fenlon: The exhausting scale of FromSoftware's open world RPG may explain why it's dropped from last year's #2 spot – I know I find revisiting it daunting. But this is FromSoftware's most generous and truest roleplaying game: there are so many ways to craft your character. Skills and elements can be freely swapped between weapons, parrying is no longer bastard hard, and if you get stuck on a boss, you can go somewhere else for 20 hours before coming back and squishing them with a giant club. That's videogames.

Tyler Colp: Everyone, including me, finished it begging for more. *Elden Ring* proved we all want the game to bite back sometimes, and that double jumping horses rule.



22

STAR WARS: KNIGHTS OF THE OLD REPUBLIC 2

RELEASED Feb 8, 2005 | TOP 100 SCORE 242.89

Quality 8.80

Importance 8.35

Hotness 6.33

Playability 6.13

Joshua Wolens: The best Star Wars game ever made, and coincidentally also the one that takes a sledgehammer to so much of the series' underlying themes

and morality. With a cast that matches BioWare's best, it conjures up a sceptical, murky picture of a very familiar universe that's still worth returning to today.



PERSONAL PICK

Tyler Wilde



ROCKET LEAGUE

No imitator has come close to matching *Rocket League*'s subtle simulation of what it would be like if rocket-powered cars played soccer. Unlike those sports games that automate the skills of athletes, players merely suggesting actions, *Rocket League* facilitates the development of new skills entirely. The Flip Reset, The Squishy Save, The Musty Flick: these are real things on account of car soccer.

PERSONAL PICK

Phil Savage



OPUS MAGNUM

The best of Zachtronics' brand of singular construction puzzlers. Each level asks you to take a handful of disparate reagents and turn them into the desired output. You lay out tracks, pistons and rotators, and program them to manipulate the elements into their desired form. It's abstract in the extreme, but that lets you focus on the open-ended beauty of creation.



21 RESIDENT EVIL 4 (2023)

RELEASED Mar 24, 2023 | TOP 100 SCORE 243.27

Ted Litchfield: Ever since 2019's *RE2* remake dropped everybody was asking: "Do they even dare to remake *Resident Evil 4*?" How do you improve on one of the greatest shooters ever made, a game that knocked its own series off-kilter for ten years? The answer, it turns out, is cribbing off *Sekiro* and implementing one of the best parry mechanics in any game.

20

FINAL FANTASY XIV

RELEASED Aug 27, 2013 | TOP 100 SCORE 243.48

Mollie Taylor: Every MMO has its quiet period, but that hasn't stopped *Final Fantasy XIV* from staying strong as *Endwalker*'s patch cycle wraps up in anticipation of the next expansion. While its downtime isn't super exciting, there's still a lot of fun to be found in its raids, relic weapon grind, and AFKing in Limsa with pals. Hype will no doubt ramp back up soon with the 7.0 reveal!



19 MASS EFFECT LEGENDARY EDITION

TOP 100 SCORE 243.94

Ted Litchfield: *Mass Effect* may just be Star Trek with sex, guns, and a militaristic contempt for democratic government, but I don't care. It absolutely rules. One of my favourite game series, a world I still kinda want to live in, demon robots from beyond the dark and all. *Starfield* who?

18 PENTIMENT

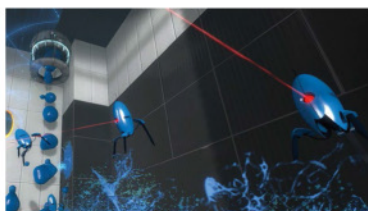
TOP 100 SCORE 244.98

Joshua Wolens: A gorgeous narrative game where Obsidian's historical materialist storytelling hits full strength, *Pentiment* pretends to be a murder mystery but is actually a meditation on how we live with the past. Every move you make is boxed in by history, and you take failures with you as you go.

17 PERSONA 5 ROYAL

TOP 100 SCORE 245.54

Mollie Taylor: Yeah it's 100 hours, but it's the best hundred hours you'll ever spend in a mega-stylish turn-based JRPG. It's a top-notch experience with one of the best soundtracks of all time and a cast of teens you'll feel fiercely protective of by the time it's over. I struggle to think of another game that plays quite like it.



16 PORTAL 2

RELEASED Apr 19, 2011 | TOP 100 SCORE 245.62

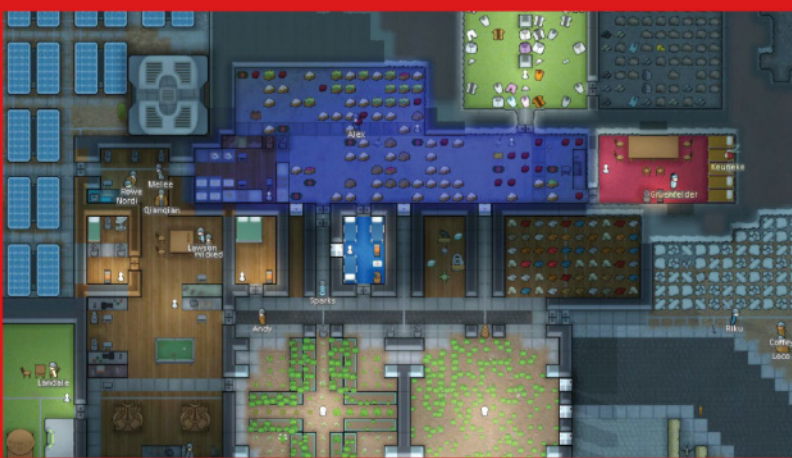
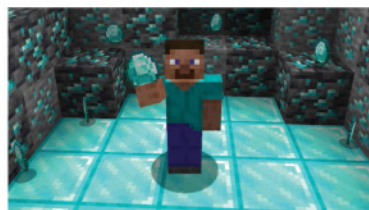
Tyler Wilde: The original *Portal* is arguably more influential as one of the first in a new class of relatively short first-person puzzle and environmental storytelling games, but *Portal 2*, which adds co-op and significantly expands the Aperture Science lore and puzzle-solving toolset, is the meatier pick. Portals remain one of gaming's all-time great physics innovations.

15 MINECRAFT

RELEASED Nov 18, 2011 | TOP 100 SCORE 245.75

Morgan Park: It's nice that we don't have to explain why *Minecraft* still ranks so high. Its appeal is universal, equally a gentle introduction to PC gaming and a rabbit hole that leads to elaborate custom worlds and massively-multiplayer community servers.

Mollie Taylor: Nothing beats the little 'pop' sound when you punch a tree trunk to death.



14

RIMWORLD

RELEASED Oct 17, 2018 | TOP 100 SCORE 246.3

Quality 8.40 Importance 8.60 Hotness 8.00 Playability 6.80

Katie Wickens: Timeless tomfoolery and tons of emergent storytelling, *Rimworld* was the start of a long and intense love affair for me. A colony builder with endless modding potential, *Rimworld* sets a high bar, with countless clones having popped up over the years. The game puts free creativity at its core, while pummeling you with intensely destructive forces – like the infamous rabid squirrel attack – to keep you invested in whatever randomly generated narrative threads you choose to follow. I will never forget my first time

staying up till 6AM making human skin hats. Take that *Minecraft*.

Fraser Brown: In my latest colony I make everyone wear bowler hats and consume human flesh. I'm not an entirely bad dude, though. When a child visited and pleaded with my smartly dressed cannibals to save their beloved pet, they were thrown in jail, brainwashed and given a new life cleaning up all the blood and dirt in the butchering room. Now they're gainfully employed and learning lots of new skills. Good wholesome fun.

13

BALDUR'S GATE 2

RELEASED Sep 21, 2000 | TOP 100 SCORE 246.84

Quality 8.89 Importance 8.91 Hotness 5.56 Playability 7.25

Andy Chalk: For a nerd who loved the idea of D&D but hated interacting with people, *Baldur's Gate 2* was pure perfection: A sprawling romp through a classic fantasy world filled with 'real' characters who had minds and ideas of their own. It was the quintessential party-based adventuring experience, and almost immeasurably influential: *BG2* ushered in a CRPG renaissance that continues to echo in games like *Pillars of Eternity*, *Dragon Age*, and of course *Baldur's Gate 3*, one of the most anticipated RPGs in years. The AD&D ruleset is dated now, but *BG2* remains an essential experience: Beautiful, unpredictable, and utterly unforgettable.

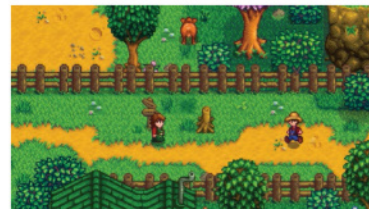


12 HADES

RELEASED Sep 17, 2020 | TOP 100 SCORE 246.96

Harvey Randall: How do you take the sting out of dying in a roguelike? Make every death a gift, with opportunities to advance storylines, flirt with hot gods, and unravel familial trauma. *Hades* still staggers me with how well it conveys its story over hundreds of runs, and it helps that it's a kickass action experience too. Dusa is also the best character.

Jody Macgregor: I recently lost my save and had to start over. Without my precious upgrades, it's affirming to see I've improved. I defeated the Bone Hydra on my first try, though Theseus still kicked my butt. *Hades* teaches you the dash-attacks and wall-slams of its kinetic combat so smoothly you don't realise how much you're learning.



11 STARDREW VALLEY

RELEASED Feb 26, 2016 | TOP 100 SCORE 247.89

Mollie Taylor: *Stardew Valley* wasn't the first to tap into the cosy pixelated farming sim genre, but it's undoubtedly the best and most influential. The sheer charm of Pelican Town and its deeply relatable residents keep it on top.

Lauren Morton: *Stardew* spawned a new era for a dormant genre and has since become a cornerstone of the cozy gaming community.

PERSONAL PICK

Sean Martin



STAR WARS JEDI: SURVIVOR

Beyond its performance – I didn't experience any major issues – *Jedi: Survivor* is one of the best and most expansive Star Wars games made. It's got great combat, exploration, traversal; the robot chase sequence on Jedha rivals any of the best *Uncharted* games. Hell, you can even grab a blaster and run off to be a bounty hunter if you're bored with Jedi nonsense.

PERSONAL PICK

Lauren Aitken



SID MEIER'S CIVILIZATION 5

Civ 5 was the first turn-based strategy game I played and over 1,000 hours later, I haven't looked back. Each leader has a clear focus that lets you build toward a specific victory condition with ease, and the DLC added even more depth and strategy. While *Civ 6* improved on some of its faults, the cartoonish design doesn't make it feel like I'm doing some solid conquering.

10

XCOM 2

RELEASED Feb 4, 2016 | TOP 100 SCORE 248.91

Quality 8.71

Importance 8.15

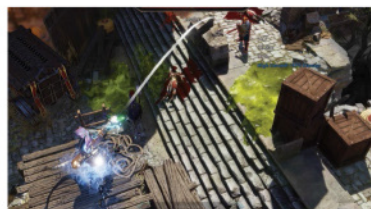
Hotness 6.89

Playability 8.17

Robin Valentine: Such a simple yet brilliant premise, to flip *XCOM*'s script and turn you from Earth's defenders against alien invasion to insurgents against alien rule. And with its DLC and expansions (not to mention many user-made mods),

XCOM 2 grew into an expansive and truly definitive strategy game. No one's done it better since, and they've certainly tried.

Harvey Randall: Everyone who's played *XCOM 2* has a story about a brave soldier sacrificed for the greater good.



9 DIVINITY: ORIGINAL SIN 2

RELEASED Sep 14, 2017 | TOP 100 SCORE 249.13

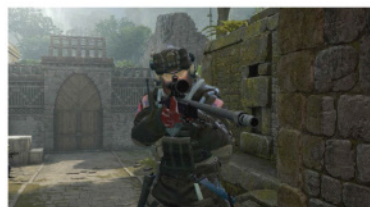
Robin Valentine: I love classic isometric RPGs, but they can be a little... stuffy. Grand but self-serious. *Original Sin 2* embraces a wonderful spirit of goofy chaos that makes its world feel so much more alive. Unlike all the monsters killed by electrocution, explosions, poison, freezing, and rains of blood thanks to the elemental combinations allowed by the game's astonishing level of interactivity.

8

COUNTER-STRIKE: GLOBAL OFFENSIVE

RELEASED Aug 21, 2012 | TOP 100 SCORE 249.20

Rich Stanton: *CS:GO* is reaching the end of a remarkable decade, during which it went from a slightly shoddy launch to the world's premiere competitive FPS. The competition is fierce, but *Counter-Strike*'s relative simplicity alongside a focus on teamwork and economy management is an incredible foundation for the most satisfying PvP gunplay on the market.



T100P
2023

7

RED DEAD REDEMPTION 2

RELEASED Dec 5, 2019 | TOP 100 SCORE 249.98

Quality 8.47

Importance 8.53

Hotness 7.69

Playability 8.20

Chris Livingston: The best thing a videogame can do is give you a big open world and leave you alone while you explore it, and *Red Dead Redemption 2* (eventually) does just that. While the story missions test my patience in the second half of the game, the sheer beauty and almost ridiculous amount of detail in the world still hasn't been matched. Meanwhile, aging cowboy Arthur Morgan remains one of the best and most believable characters in games. If a genie could grant me one wish, it's that Rockstar would can *GTA 6* in favour of another *Red Dead* game.

Morgan Park: Yea, that guy sure has a cool last name. Probably the coolest thing about him.

6 STREET FIGHTER 6

RELEASED Jun 2, 2023 | TOP 100 SCORE 250.66

Mollie Taylor: *Street Fighter 6* ushered in the new generation of fighters, and did it with a bang. It's a complete package straight outta the bag, with a stellar online mode and a diet-*Yakuza* RPG mode. It's super approachable to boot, making it a great entry point for fighting game newbies.

Tyler Wilde: The entire UI is arcane to me, but once I found *Street Fighter 6*'s tutorials, it became my favourite *Street Fighter*. I'm finally understanding concepts and techniques that I never learned in 30 years of futzing around in the training level. I can do combos on purpose now! Bonus points for having a preposterous character creator in the diet-*Yakuza* mode, as Mollie put it.



5 HALF-LIFE 2

RELEASED Nov 16, 2004 | TOP 100 SCORE 256.85

Morgan Park: It's not just tradition and importance keeping *Half-Life 2* around: it's one of my favourite singleplayer FPS games 19 years after launch, largely because guns take a back seat to the puzzles, characters, and level-specific gimmicks that brand it into my brain.

Rich Stanton: Still a fantastically grim and surprising journey, and one that has aged beautifully.



4

DWARF FORTRESS

RELEASED Aug 8, 2006 | TOP 100 SCORE 259.26

Quality 8.83

Importance 9.20

Hotness 8.70

Playability 6.57

Wes Fenlon: One of the few games to nearly max-out our Importance meter, *Dwarf Fortress* is the template for all colony management sims and the shining beacon on the hill for procedural narrative in games. It can generate 1,000 years of history for your world, while one of your dwarves can go insane if he's not allowed to craft a legendary bucket he saw in a dream. *Dwarf Fortress* contains multitudes. It used to be a harder recommendation, but the Steam release's sprites and mouse controls make it a game everyone should experience at least once.

3

CRUSADER KINGS 3

RELEASED Sep 1, 2020 | TOP 100 SCORE 260.05

Quality 8.82

Importance 8.43

Hotness 8.23

Playability 8.80

Robin Valentine: The enormous, colour-coded map that confronts you when you first boot up *Crusader Kings 3* makes you think you're in for some fiddly, demanding grand strategy game. And... well, you kind of are, but that's not really what the game's about. At its heart, it's a role-playing game – one where you can step into the shoes of almost any landed noble in European medieval history, and live through every wedding, birth, revolt, feast, and suspicious hunting trip that touches their life. As you play each of your dynasty's successors, you build your own fascinating alternate history of the world – but more importantly, a history of people, being as messy as real people are, but on the grand and often absurd stage of medieval politics.



2

THE WITCHER 3: WILD HUNT

RELEASED May 18, 2015 | TOP 100 SCORE 264.80

Quality 9.00 Importance 9.12 Hotness 8.39 Playability 8.00

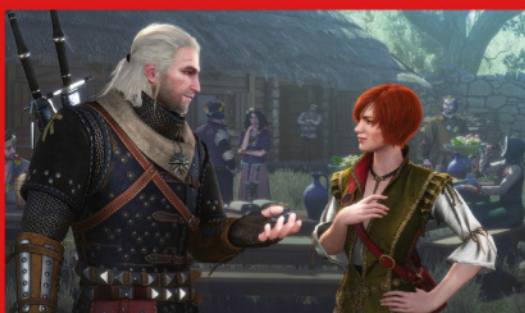
Wes Fenlon: The launch of *Cyberpunk 2077* (and its notable absence from the Top 100) make it clear just how hard it is to make a videogame, much less a massive RPG. With distance from *The Witcher 3* I marvel at how much it nailed. Few of the quests you'll find trotting around in the open world will ask you to just go kill three nekkers or whatever. Instead you'll solve a haunting, or chat with a troll, or face a tribunal of angry monsters. And there are so many of them. Even the simple quests often have a twist to them that makes them linger in memory. I still remember helping a man hunt down a rare black pearl – essentially a fetch quest – and learning, at the end, that he'd hoped it could cure his sick wife. But it

couldn't. The pearl's healing qualities were a myth. *The Witcher 3* was always finding some twist of the knife to give your actions weight. In the eight years since, too few RPGs have followed its example.

Robin Valentine: I look back on *The Witcher 3* and think, "Will I ever get to lose myself in a videogame like that again?". When the game came out, I was junior staff living on my own with more time than money, and could

freely devote the 150 hours to conquering Geralt's world. But it's a world that truly justifies and rewards that time investment, a vast landscape that is impossibly dense with crafted narrative. I look back on simple journeys I made from one main quest location to another and remember all the sprawling, intricate detours along the way – sidequests that made me feel like I was creating my own stories of sword and sorcery every time I mounted up and hit the road. And then, impossibly, they put out expansions that were even better and richer – *Hearts of Stone* still stands as my favourite adventure in any RPG. *Cyberpunk 2077* may have been a mess, but CD Projekt Red's masterpiece still hasn't been bested.

**ALWAYS FINDING
SOME TWIST OF THE
KNIFE TO GIVE YOUR
ACTIONS WEIGHT**



T100P

2023



1

DISCO ELYSIUM

RELEASED Oct 15, 2019 | TOP 100 SCORE 271.61

Quality 9.45

Importance 9.00

Hotness 7.78

Playability 8.64

Jacob Ridley: What can I say about *Disco Elysium* that hasn't been said already? Released four years ago, it's been our top pick for the Top 100 for all that time, and I've played it every year. Recently, I've come to appreciate the game in a different manner: it's become the perfect Steam Deck title.

Disco Elysium is not a complicated game to play. You don't need to mash any keys, quickly access any skills or abilities, or really do all that much at any great speed. For weary-eyed flights or lounging around after a long day, its slow pace and mechanical simplicity make it a game I'm often reaching for despite having piles of newer games I really should be playing instead.

It's also a picture of performance for the less-than-mighty Deck. Feel free to crank down the frame-rate, turn down the wattage, even halve the shading rate if you really want to; graphical performance isn't required to enjoy *Disco*'s easy tempo or gorgeous backdrops. While I still feel your first playthrough should be writ large on a monitor, it is one of my absolute favourites to play on Steam Deck.

Lauren Morton: I was beginning to feel self-conscious that I can't imagine a new game beating *Disco Elysium* for the top spot but this year it's backed by math. We ran the numbers and this really is the new seminal RPG experience.

Ted Litchfield: My friends still clown on me for how hard I tried to get them to play this game. "It's like, an RPG

founders is far from a clear cut "fat cat money men vs. passionate artists" situation, and *Disco Elysium*, a handful of short stories, and a fan-translated Estonian novel may forever remain our keyhole view into what feels like a boundless alternate history created by a scrappy punk collective.

Wes Fenlon: Sometime soon I need to do an all-muscles run of *Disco Elysium*. I think most of us eager to play such a wordy game gravitate towards drama or rhetoric or Inland Empire or whatever, and the game is frequently hilarious no matter what, but I really need to know what it's like to be the strongest, absolute dumbest loser of a detective to ever wear a badge in Revachol.

Joshua Wolens: *Disco Elysium* captures post-Soviet malaise like nothing else. Revachol is a body whose spirit has left it. It knows something has gone wrong, that the locomotive of history has stopped short of its destination. The future is cancelled in favour of an interminable present, but that situation can't hold. Something has to give, and it's a shame we may never find out what that was going to be.

"I CAN'T IMAGINE A NEW GAME BEATING DISCO ELYSIUM FOR THE TOP SPOT"

right? But there's no combat, just skill checks, and it's kinda like *Planescape: Torment* but, like, political and stuff." The breathless *Disco Elysium* rants will continue until morale improves.

It's all the more precious now that further exploration of the world of *Disco Elysium* seems like a distant impossibility. A recent investigative documentary by People Make Games revealed that the dispute between developer ZA/UM's



Future Publishing Ltd

Quay House, The Ambury, Bath BA1 1UA

Tel 01225 442244 | Email letters@pcgamer.com

www.pcgamer.com



facebook.com
[/pcgammagazine](https://www.facebook.com/pcgammagazine)



youtube.com
[/pcgamer](https://www.youtube.com/pcgamer)



twitter.com
[/pcgamer](https://twitter.com/pcgamer)



twitch.tv
[/pcgamer](https://twitch.tv/pcgamer)



forums.pcgamer.com



[pcgaming
show.com](https://pcgamingshow.com)

SUPPLEMENT EDITORIAL TEAM

Brand Director	Tim Clark
Global Editor-in-Chief	Evan Lahti
Editor-in-Chief, UK	Phil Savage
Print Editor	Robert Jones
Contributing Editor	Ian Evenden
Art Editor	John Strike

CONTRIBUTORS

Fraser Brown, Robin Valentine, Rich Stanton, Joshua Wolens, Lauren Aitken, Sarah James, Sean Martin, Mollie Taylor, Dave James, Jacob Ridley, Katie Wickens, Josh Lloyd, Tyler Wilde, Wes Fenlon, Chris Livingston, Jody Macgregor, Sean Prescott, Andy Chalk, Jorge Jimenez, Morgan Park, Lauren Morton, Tyler Colp, Ted Litchfield, Harvey Randall

SUBSCRIPTIONS

Email: contact@myfavouritemagazines.co.uk

UK orderline: 0344 848 2852 | **International orderline:**

+44 (0)344 848 2852 | www.magazinesdirect.com

DISTRIBUTED BY Marketforce, 5 Churchill Place, Canary

Wharf, London, E14 5HU | **Tel:** 0203 787 9001

www.marketforce.co.uk

LICENSING Email: licensing@futurenet.com

ISSN: 1351-3540

All contents © 2023 Future Publishing Limited or published under licence. All rights reserved. No part of this magazine may be used, stored, transmitted or reproduced in any way without the prior written permission of the publisher. Future Publishing Limited (company number 2008855) is registered in England and Wales. Registered office: Quay House, The Ambury, Bath BA1 1UA. All information contained in this publication is for information only and is, as far as we are aware, correct at the time of going to press. Future cannot accept any responsibility for errors or inaccuracies in such information. You are advised to contact manufacturers and retailers directly with regard to the price of products/services referred to in this publication. Apps and websites mentioned in this publication are not under our control. We are not responsible for their contents or any other changes or updates to them. This magazine is fully independent and not affiliated in any way with the companies mentioned herein.

CATEGORICALLY CORRECT

You've seen the full list, but who were the big winners in our individual voting categories?

Quality Simply the team's favourite games

POSITION	GAME	QUALITY SCORE
1	DISCO ELYSIUM	9.45
2	THE WITCHER 3: WILD HUNT	9.00
3	PENTIMENT	9.00
4	BALDUR'S GATE II	8.89
5	VAMPIRE: THE MASQUERADE - BLOODLINES	8.89

Importance The most influential in PC gaming history

POSITION	GAME	IMPORTANCE SCORE
1	DOOM (1993)	9.87
2	MINECRAFT	9.97
3	HALF-LIFE 2	9.62
4	DEUS EX	9.36
5	TEAM FORTRESS 2	9.33

Hotness The most exciting and relevant games around

POSITION	GAME	HOTNESS SCORE
1	COUNTER-STRIKE: GLOBAL OFFENSIVE	9.10
2	ELDEN RING	8.91
3	STREET FIGHTER 6	8.75
4	MINECRAFT	8.75
5	DWARF FORTRESS	8.70

Playability How well does it play today?

POSITION	GAME	PLAYABILITY SCORE
1	COUNTER-STRIKE: GLOBAL OFFENSIVE	9.25
2	RESIDENT EVIL 4 REMAKE	8.83
3	CRUSADER KINGS 3	8.80
4	DAVE THE DIVER	8.80
5	DISCO ELYSIUM	8.64

Issue 357
October 2023